O GOD, IT ENDS IN DESPAIR

Madhav Ham Parinaam Niraasha

Original Maithili Short Story collection authored

by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

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Translated into English

by

Rameshwar Prasad Mandal

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Translated into English from the original Maithili

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Rameshwar Prasad Mandal

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Translated from the Maithili short story collection 'Madhav Ham Parinaam Niraasha' Authored by Jagdish Prasad Mandal
Translated into English by Shri Rameshwar Prasad Mandal

O GOD, IT ENDS IN DESPAIR is the English translation of Madhav Ham Parinaam Niraasha, a Maithili short-story collection by Jagdish Prasad Mandal, translated by Rameshwar Prasad Mandal. The book brings together ten stories rooted in rural Mithila, family life, labour, migration, duty, fear, regret and moral consequence.

Through ordinary people and everyday situations, these stories explore how human life is shaped by time, responsibility, social bonds, desire, greed, service and right action. Mandal's narrative world is simple in expression but deep in ethical awareness, allowing the meaning of life to emerge through lived experience, dialogue and reflection.

The translation seeks to preserve the emotional force, cultural fragrance and humane seriousness of the original Maithili while keeping the English clear, natural and readable.

O GOD, IT ENDS IN DESPAIR invites readers to see village life as a mirror of wider human truth, where every decision slowly becomes the result of life.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the ordinary people of Mithila
whose labour, responsibility, relationships, mistakes and moral courage reveal how every action slowly becomes the result of life.

- Rameshwar Prasad Mandal

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Preface

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Literature is not separate from human life. The society in which a person lives, the family into which he is born, the circumstances through which he passes, and the hopes, disappointments, struggles, mistakes and experiences amid which he spends his life all enter literature in one form or another. From this point of view, the short story is a very important literary form, for it brings before us the larger truths hidden within the small incidents of life. An ordinary event, a household conversation, the pain of an old person, the confusion of a young man, the anxiety of a woman, or the memory of a migrant may become, in a story, a deeper recognition of life. The fiction of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal is shaped by such lived experiences. In his stories, he presents village life, family, labour, poverty, education, migration, religion, time, fear, greed, service and humanity in such a way that the reader does not merely read a story, but also begins to think about his own life and society.

Madhav Ham Parinaam Niraasha is an important Maithili short-story collection by Shri Jagdish Prasad

Mandal. While presenting this collection in English, I have repeatedly felt that the strength of these stories lies in their ordinary world of everyday life. Their characters are not extraordinary people, nor do they occupy high positions of power or status. They are village people, householders, educated young men, migrants, old parents, daughters, sons, farmers, small traders and human beings who, amid the confusions of life, sometimes make the right decisions and sometimes move in the wrong direction. This ordinary life acquires special meaning in these stories.

The title of this collection also compels the reader to think. Madhav Ham Parinaam Niraasha is not merely the title of one story in its Maithili form; it expresses the central feeling of the whole collection. Throughout life, a person wishes to gain something. He wants money, respect, peace and happiness in the family, a good future for his children and honour in society. But life does not become meaningful through desire alone. A person’s actions, decisions, sense of time, responsibility and conduct ultimately shape the result of his life. When there is no balance between desire and action, when a person does not make the right decision at the right time, when he cuts himself off from family and society, or when he entangles his life in greed, confusion and carelessness, he may be left with nothing but despair in the end. The stories in this collection lead the reader towards this sense of consequence.

While preparing the English version of these stories, my greatest concern has been to preserve the soul of the original Maithili narratives. It is not easy to carry fully into another language the sweetness of Maithili, its folk sensibility, the natural ease of its dialogues, and the fragrance of rural life. Even so, I have tried to ensure that English readers do not merely understand the plot while reading these stories, but also feel the world of life from which they are born. Instead of making the language difficult or overly scholarly, I have tried to keep it simple, clear and natural, so that ordinary readers may reach the emotional core of these stories with ease.

One major quality of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's vision as a storyteller is that he sees life from very close quarters. In his work, the village is not merely a background; it is a living world of human relationships, behaviour, struggles and memories. Fields, homes, doorways, markets, roads, families, places of religious recitation, marriage, shraddha, migration and everyday conversation all enter his stories as natural parts of life. He does not present an event merely as an event. He also brings forward the social meaning hidden behind it. That is why, while reading his stories, one feels that the writer is not merely telling a story, but also explaining the account of life.

The first story in this collection, A View of the Village, is a story of migration, memory and

separation from one's roots. Lalit Mohan receives higher education and goes to America as a scientist. He advances in the field of science and spends a long time abroad. His wife, Sushobhita, also lives with him. From the outside, life appears successful, but within, the distance from family, society and village keeps growing. As age begins to weigh upon them, the memory of the village awakens in their minds. Their son and daughter have moved into their own separate lives. In old age, husband and wife both begin to remember their country, their village and the closeness of family. When they return to the village, they find that it has changed greatly. The old familiar people are no longer there. The new generation is not closely connected with them, and in the village of their own forefathers they remain almost like outsiders.

This story is not merely the story of a person returning from abroad. A larger question is hidden in it: if a person spends his whole life in personal advancement alone and does not keep his bonds with family and society alive, what remains with him in old age? Lalit Mohan gained much through education and science, but the social side of life slipped away from him. The story encourages the reader to think that human success is not fulfilled by money, position or life abroad alone, but Family, society and human closeness are equally necessary for life. That is why the title "A View of the Village" carries a deep irony within it. Lalit Mohan returns to see the village, but in

truth the village shows him his own life.

The second story, Nectar, begins with a spiritual discussion and moves towards social and moral questions. In this story, life is understood through the symbols of nectar and poison. The story of the churning of the ocean is mentioned, but the writer's purpose is not merely to narrate a tale from the Puranas. He asks what the element of nectar is within a human being, and what the element of poison is. Through the Bhagavata Katha, the Brahmasthan, and the dialogues of Raghuvansh Bhai, Jeevanand and Kaladhar, it becomes clear that religion is not fulfilled merely by listening to a katha or holding religious events. If love, compassion, kindness, self-control and humanity do not enter society, then the true fruit of religious practice remains incomplete.

In this story, Kaladhar represents the new generation. He asks what godliness truly means. Raghuvansh Bhai explains, in simple words, that loving the world, loving human beings as well as other living creatures, and controlling lust, anger, greed and attachment within oneself is true godliness. This thought is very important. Even today, worship, katha, discourse and religious programmes take place in society, but the question is whether they truly change human behaviour. Nectar takes the reader beyond the outer form of religion and invites him to think about its inner moral meaning. The story tells us that the real nectar of life lies in love, compassion and self-

control, not merely in ritual.

The third story, Time Has Passed, is a story of a changing village and a changing time. The narrator returns to the village from Kolkata after fifteen years. He had settled in the city because of his job, but the memory of the village remained within him. When the question of his daughter's marriage arises, he feels that she should be married in Mithila. With this thought, he comes to the village. On reaching there, he sees that the village of earlier days has changed greatly. Roads have been built, government facilities have arrived, and people's way of life has changed. Yet within this change, there are also lives that have been broken. Siyaram's life is one such example.

Siyaram was once a hardworking, honest and useful man. His life had labour and self-respect in it. But time changed. The age of the plough and oxen passed, old trades broke down, and the economic structure of the village changed. Age, poverty and changing time broke Siyaram from within. When he says that his time has passed, the sentence is not only an expression of his personal pain. It becomes a sign of the end of an entire age. This story tells us that it is difficult to live without understanding the movement of time. A person or society that does not change with time is slowly pushed aside. In Time Has Passed, change in the village appears not only in the form of roads and buildings, but also in the form of a broken world of human labour.

The fourth story, What Time Demands, is one of the more reflective stories in this collection. Through Neelam, an MA student, it raises questions about society, family, relations between men and women, marriage and caste. Neelam is educated, and as a student of sociology, she looks at her society with a thoughtful mind. She understands that old social systems have some good aspects, but also many restrictions that hold back human freedom and equality. A question rises in her mind: if humankind is one, why are marriage and social relations bound so harshly by caste?

Neelam's thinking in this story is not merely personal. It is the thinking of a new generation. She wants to understand whether the formation of a family should take place only under the pressure of tradition, or whether it should also be based on qualities, understanding, equality and humanity. As soon as the idea of the Swayamvara tradition appears in the story, this question becomes clearer. How did a society that once accepted choice on the basis of qualities later become so rigid in matters of caste? What Time Demands tells the reader that if society is to remain alive, it must preserve its good traditions while changing the bad and unjust tendencies within it. Time changes, education grows, ideas change, and the new generation wants to understand the path of its life for itself. In such a situation, society's role is not merely to restrain, but also to guide.

The fifth story, O God, It Ends in Despair, is the title story of the collection. For that reason, it holds special importance in the book as a whole. In this story, the question of life's outcome comes before the reader very clearly. At the centre of the story are characters such as Shivnath and Sarup Bhai. Shivnath is educated, but life does not open a straight path for him. In search of work and livelihood, he has to leave home. He reaches Bangalore and, through hard work, understanding and the proper use of opportunity, shapes his life. City life opens new paths before him. He earns, looks after his family, and after some time also wishes to return to the village. Within him remains the desire to stay connected with his village, his homestead and his old society.

On the other side, Sarup Bhai's life moves in a different direction. His life becomes trapped in dowry, land, greed, court cases and wrong decisions. Through him, the writer shows that human life is not made by desire alone. Right decisions, a sense of time, labour and balanced conduct are also necessary. The collapse that comes in Sarup Bhai's life is not only the failure of one person. Behind it lie the wrong tendencies of society as well. The desire for dowry, disputes over land, greed within the family and the entanglement of court cases make a person hollow from within. That is why the title O God, It Ends in Despair becomes deeply meaningful. This title does not merely awaken a devotional or sorrowful feeling.

It also points towards the final account of life. When a person looks at the result of his life and finds that, even after desiring many things, he could not take the right path, despair naturally rises within him.

One special quality of this story is that the writer does not reduce despair to mere emotion. He also shows its causes. By placing the lives of Shivnath and Sarup Bhai side by side, the story tells us that time gives everyone an opportunity, but not everyone is able to use that opportunity in the same way. Some people shape their lives through labour and understanding, while others become trapped in their own attachment and confusion and lose the strength of life. From this point of view, this story may be called the central story of the collection, because it carries the same feeling of life, action, consequence and regret that returns again and again, in different forms, throughout the book.

The sixth story, Fear, explores the fear hidden within the human mind. In the story, Singheshwar is troubled by his own fear. He is afraid of darkness, and he also feels fear when he goes to a government office. This is not merely fear of an external situation. It is born of weakness of mind, ignorance, confusion and lack of experience. To find a solution to this problem, he goes to Raghuvansh Kaka. Raghuvansh Kaka takes his question seriously and slowly explains that fear arises for many reasons. Sometimes it comes from ignorance, sometimes from illusion, sometimes

from wrongdoing, sometimes from not knowing the right way to do a task, and sometimes from the memory of old harshness in systems of authority.

The importance of this story lies in the fact that the writer does not treat fear only as a personal weakness. He sees it at both social and mental levels. Why does an ordinary person feel afraid of going to a government office? Because he does not know its ways, its language or its process, and often the harshness of the official sitting behind the desk also remains fixed in his mind as fear. In the same way, fear of darkness is often not real. It is born of imagination and illusion. Raghuvansh Kaka explains that a person's illusion also makes fear larger. When the mind understands the truth, fear begins to lessen.

Fear gives the ordinary reader a very simple but useful lesson. If one runs away from fear, fear grows. If one understands it and faces it, fear decreases. If one is afraid of some work, one should learn the method of that work. If one is afraid of a government office, one should understand its rules and procedures. If one feels fear because of wrongdoing, one should keep away from wrongdoing. This is a story of practical wisdom in life. In it, the writer shows in a simple way that courage does not mean physical strength alone. Correct knowledge, right conduct and clarity of mind also give courage to a person.

The seventh story, Lost, is a story of the pain born from the neglect of time and duty. In the story,

the narrator meets Sukhdev while returning from the market. Seeing Sukhdev's physical condition, he is surprised. Sukhdev is no longer as active as he once was. In the course of their conversation, the inner pain of Sukhdev's life opens up. He has spent a large part of his life in useless talk, playing cards and other empty activities. As long as his father was alive, the main responsibility of the family rested on him. Sukhdev did not take life seriously. But when the burden of the family came upon his own shoulders, he understood that once time is lost, it cannot be brought back.

Before Sukhdev stand his old parents, his sick mother, a brother living separately, the worries of home and family, and the burden of three daughters of marriageable age. Now he wants to do something, but his body is broken and time has slipped from his hands. The title 'Lost' does not point only to the loss of some object. Here, what has been lost is time, opportunity, self-confidence and the balance of life. The writer shows that the responsibilities of life suddenly come and stand before a person, but preparation for them has to be made slowly and in time. A person who does not understand the value of time in youth later finds the burden of life very heavy.

In this story, the truth of rural life comes naturally. The market, the road, the doorway, customary enquiries after one another's welfare, and household conversation all bring forward a large

question of life. The story does not sound like a sermon, but while reading it the reader understands that time is the greatest wealth. Money can be lost and gained again, but time, once lost, does not return. Sukhdev's life warns the reader that life cannot be spent only in laughter, idle talk and postponement. To understand family, labour and responsibility in time is the wisdom of life.

The eighth story, He Proved Better Than I Did, centres on the service of parents, shraddha rites and the true duty of a son. In this story, Mahendra and Dinesh are two brothers. Mahendra is bright in his studies. His father, Murari, educates him further, and he becomes a doctor. Later, he goes to America. On the other hand, the younger son, Dinesh, stays in the village after matriculation and makes farming the basis of his life. Outwardly, Mahendra appears more successful. He is a doctor, he lives abroad, and in society's eyes he has status. But slowly the story raises the question of what should truly be called success.

After his mother's death, Mahendra comes to the village after twelve years. He wants to perform the shraddha rites. In society, shraddha rites have importance, but in the story a more important question comes forward: what is the place of the son who stayed with his parents while they were alive, served them in illness, and looked after the home and family? Dinesh has performed the real service of the parents. He did not leave the village. He looked after

the farming, cared for the home, and understood the needs of his old parents. When this matter comes before the social meeting, Mahendra becomes aware of his own position. He understands that becoming great only in outward terms is not the fullness of life.

The title He Proved Better Than I Did is very simple, but it carries a deep sense of self-acceptance. Mahendra accepts that Dinesh proved better than he did. This acceptance is the moral centre of the story. Here, the writer does not oppose shraddha rites, but he makes it clear that before performing rituals in the name of the dead, one should understand the importance of serving them while they are alive. Parents need service, respect and support during their lifetime. More important than large feasts, rituals and expenses after death is the service given to them while they are living. In this way, the story becomes one of family responsibility, the duty of a son, and service free from show.

The ninth story, My Hopes Went Up in Smoke, is a story of incomplete preparation and unbalanced dreams in life. At the centre of this story is Radhamohan. Radhamohan and Manesar once studied together. Manesar continued his studies, but Radhamohan's studies slipped away from him. From childhood, Radhamohan had been drawn towards kirtan, bhajan, singing and artistic activities. At that time, in village after village, there was an atmosphere of kirtan groups, bhajan groups, drama and nautanki.

Radhamohan felt that he would move forward in this direction and become a good singer or artist. There was hope in his mind, there was faith, and there was a flight of imagination too. But life is not made by desire alone. It also needs practice, discipline, a sense of time and an understanding of circumstances. This was precisely what Radhamohan's life lacked.

Slowly, time passed. After the kirtan group, much of his time was spent with the nautanki party. Then he began to work with a drama party. But the world of folk theatre and stage performance, which he had taken to be his life, slowly began to break down. One after another, the groups and parties scattered. The artists went their own ways. In the meantime, Radhamohan passed the age of fifty. His parents too were no more. The responsibility of the family stood before him. The marriage of daughters, the problem of dowry, financial arrangements and the burden of household life began to press upon him. When he admits before Manesar that on the day he left his studies he had hoped to become a good singer and a good artist, but that today the whole flight of his heart has gone up in smoke, the title of the story becomes fully clear.

My Hopes Went Up in Smoke is not merely a sentence of passing sadness. It is the pain of a person who had a dream in life but could not place that dream on the firm ground of reality. In this story, the writer does not oppose artistic inclination. He does

not say that bhajan, kirtan, singing, nautanki or drama are wrong. He only shows that art too cannot move away from the responsibilities of life. To move forward in any field, labour, discipline, practice and foresight are needed. Life cannot be shaped only by emotion or by the flight of the mind. Radhamohan's life warns the reader that a decision taken in youth can affect the whole of life. If education, labour and family duty are neglected, only regret remains later.

The tenth story, Blessing Money, is an inspiring and life-affirming story in this collection. It presents the life of a small trader named Badbadiya. The story begins with a very ordinary situation. Krishna Kumar and Rukmini buy chillies from him early in the morning. Badbadiya remains engaged in his small trade with order, care and labour. He does not have very large capital, but he has honesty towards his work and respect for time. From the goods for sale to the weighing tools, he keeps everything arranged. This small detail opens his character before us. He does not consider his work small. Instead, he builds the path of his life through that very work.

In the course of conversation, the story of his life comes forward. The one thousand rupees he received from his mother-in-law at the time of marriage, the five hundred rupees he received as blessing money when he touched the feet of elders, and a bicycle were his first capital. He accepted these as blessings and started his business with them. That money was not

merely money. It carried family affection, trust and good wishes. That is why it became Blessing Money for him. He did not consider small capital insignificant. Through hard work, punctuality and skill in dealing with people, he slowly shaped his life. Through thirty-five years of labour, he ran his family, married off his daughters and educated his sons. In this way, the story tells us that success in life does not come only from large capital. Through honest labour, patience, proper use of resources and continuity, a person can also build his life.

Blessing Money adds a note of hope to this collection. In many stories, we find situations where time is lost, relationships break, wrong decisions are taken, a person becomes distant from family, and regret comes at the end of life. But in this story, the writer shows that if a person recognises even a small opportunity properly, it can become the basis of life. Badbadiya's life is an inspiration for those who use poverty as an excuse and sit idle. He shows that the path out of want is made through labour and discipline. Small capital, a small trade and an ordinary life can also be honourable if they carry honesty, care for time and steady labour.

While reading the stories of this collection, it becomes clear that Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal looks at life from the standpoint of consequences. He connects a person's present with his past and then shows that today's action becomes tomorrow's result.

In A View of the Village, there is the result of migration and separation from one's roots. In Nectar, there is the difference between religion and conduct. In Time Has Passed, there is the pain of changing time. In What Time Demands, there is the social awareness of the new generation. In O God, It Ends in Despair, there is the question of greed, court cases, labour and the fruit of life. In Fear, there is the confusion within the human mind and the way out of it. In Lost, there is the sorrow of wasted time. In He Proved Better Than I Did, there is the difference between service and ritual. In My Hopes Went Up in Smoke, there is the struggle between incomplete dreams and the truth of life. In Blessing Money, there is the inspiration to build a larger life from small means.

The language of these stories is simple. The writer explains difficult thoughts through village examples, household situations and dialogues. In his style, there is less preaching and more experience. He does not give direct orders to the reader. He gives the reader a chance to think through the lives of the characters. Dialogues are very important in his stories. When the characters speak, they do not merely talk. They also open up the whole background of their lives. The tired breath of an old man, the memory of a migrant, the question of a student, the worry of a farmer, the orderliness of a small trader and the self-acceptance of a son all come together to make the stories alive.

The social importance of this collection is also special. It contains the rural life of Mithila, but its questions are not limited to Mithila alone. Today, migration is everywhere. Distance from family is everywhere. The problem of old parents is everywhere. The question of education and unemployment is everywhere. Problems such as dowry, caste, ritual, fear, wasted time and the neglect of small labour are widespread. That is why these stories, though local, carry a wider meaning. The writer takes the stories from his village society, but those stories reach a larger truth of human life.

While translating these Maithili stories into English, my effort has been to preserve, as far as possible, the feeling, closeness and social meaning of the original. It is not easy to carry into English the sweetness of Maithili, its folk voice, rural forms of address, family closeness and the natural ease of dialogue. Still, I have tried to help readers connect with the soul of the stories and feel that they are not reading about some distant society, but about things connected with their own world of life. The language of the translation has been kept simple, clear and easy, so that the flow of the stories remains and the voices of the characters sound natural. Wherever there are signs of rural life, family relations, folk belief, social behaviour and lived experience, I have tried to preserve their feeling.

The aim of this book is not only to bring Maithili

stories into English, but also to carry to readers the folk life, moral concern and human experience that form the real strength of these stories. I believe that English readers will be able to feel in these stories the soil of Mithila, the movement of village society, the worries of family, the dignity of labour and the struggle going on within the human being. This book may be especially useful for readers who seek in literature not only entertainment, but also an understanding of society, life and human conduct.

In the end, Madhav Ham Parinaam Niraasha is not only a collection of ten stories. It is a book that explains the account of life. It contains human desires, mistakes, labour, attachment, fear, regret and possibility too. The stories of this collection make the reader understand that the result of life is not formed suddenly. It is formed slowly. Every day's conduct, every decision, every neglect, every act of labour and every relationship come together to shape the final form of a person's life. That is why, while reading these stories, the reader does not see only the characters. He also begins to see his own life and his own society.

Somewhere he sees the loneliness of a person returning after migration, somewhere the difference between religion and conduct, somewhere the pain of a life cut off from time, somewhere the restlessness of the new generation, and somewhere the inspiration of an honourable life built through small

labour. In this way, the collection prepares the reader to think from within. It tells us that human life does not move by fate or desire alone. It is made through alertness, responsibility, labour, relationships and decisions taken at the right time. If these stories make the reader even a little more careful towards his actions, family, society and time, then the purpose of this translation may be considered fulfilled. This is the greatest meaning of this book.

Life is a stream of water;
Flow is its movement
Know how to swim?
Identity is forward moment.
Thanks all and the lover of book.

- Rameshwar Prasad Mandal

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A View of the Village

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After living in America for thirty years, the memory of the village began to take a strong hold on Lalit Mohan. Left to himself, he would hardly have thought of returning to the village, but under pressure from his wife, Sushobhita, the idea began to grow in his mind too.

Lalit Mohan was the first person from the village to receive higher education in science. At that time, when Lalit Mohan completed his MSc, the number of educated people, that is, literate people, in Mohanpur was only four or five per cent. Even that was only among men. Among women, education had no real place at all. In a settlement spread over five hundred bighas, that is, in the whole village, there were only eight or nine families in which the practice of reading and writing had begun. The remaining one hundred and fifty or two hundred families had no such practice. In other words, almost the whole village was illiterate. There was no school in Mohanpur. Ten or twelve families had more than twenty bighas of land, but more than fifty per cent of the families, that is,

more than half of them, had less than five bighas. There were also families who did not even have homestead land of their own.

In Mohanpur, Lalit Mohan's family, that is, his wider clan family, was as large as it was well settled. It was a family linked with the royal estate. Lalit Mohan's grandfather, Krishnanand, had held a post in the royal estate and had earned property through it. Of course, the old princely order had broken down and the country had become independent, but the property that Krishnanand had acquired was still there. Krishnanand had died three years before Independence, around 1944, but his two sons, Devanand and Brahmanand, remained linked with the royal estate. In Mohanpur, where the total cultivated area of the village was five hundred bighas, two hundred bighas belonged to Devanand's family alone.

From childhood, Lalit Mohan was very intelligent in his studies. In the beginning, he was educated in Darbhanga. Later, after passing matriculation, he studied at Patna Science College. Lalit Mohan used to stand first in his class. He had not stood first in matriculation; he had stood third. But from ISc onwards, he began to stand first in Patna University, and continued to do so up to MSc.

There was a demand for scientists in America, and Lalit Mohan went there as a scientist. In our society, child marriage was practised, though it would

not be right to say that it was practised fully and everywhere. In most castes, child marriage was certainly common, but there were also some castes where it existed in some families and not in others. Behind the practice of child marriage, among those castes where it was followed, there was a belief that arranging the marriage of sons and daughters was a debt that parents had to repay. Illiteracy, poverty and economic hardship were spread throughout society. More than three-fourths of the people received neither enough nourishing food nor proper treatment when they fell seriously ill. Life had no firm or dependable foundation. That is why parents adopted the practice of child marriage in order to free themselves from the debt of marrying off their sons and daughters.

When Lalit Mohan passed his MSc, marriage proposals began to arrive from village after village. Six months after leaving college, he was married. Just as Lalit Mohan's family was linked with a royal family, his marriage too was arranged in a family connected with the royal circle. In our country, just as there were landlord families, there were kings and princely rulers too. The condition of the country today was not the same as it had been before Independence, that is, before 1947. At that time, there were thousands of landlords and rulers.

When the mass movement against British rule became intense during the freedom struggle, both

landlordism and princely rule came to an end before the country became independent, that is, before 1947.

Lalit Mohan was married to Sushobhita. Sushobhita had completed her BA. Born into a landlord family, she had been brought up in the style and comfort of that world.

Six months after Lalit Mohan's marriage, the two of them, husband and wife, Lalit Mohan and Sushobhita, went to America. The America of those days was not the America of today, but it was certainly an advanced country. As a scientist, Lalit Mohan received all kinds of facilities at the government level.

On the day the couple left for America, their family, along with relatives and people from the village community, gave them a joyful send-off. After reaching America, for some days neither Lalit Mohan nor Sushobhita felt at ease, but slowly, as they grew used to the place, they settled there and began to like it. In those days, unlike today, there were fewer Indians abroad, especially in America. At present, there are many countries in the world where a large number of people of Indian origin live.

Being a man of science, Lalit Mohan kept himself focused on his work, that is, on scientific research. He became so busy that he forgot the family of his forefathers and the village society too. Even when Lalit Mohan had lived in the village, his link with village society had not been as close as it usually is, and as it

should be. To begin with, he had been born in a family that had no real concern for the families of the village society. Besides, Lalit Mohan was naturally someone who had spent most of his time in school and college.

Time moves on in its own way. People may or may not understand that movement well, but everyone understands this much: the day, date and month that exist today will not remain tomorrow. Not only that, everyone also knows that if it is five minutes past twelve now, then moment by moment, minute by minute, time will move forward, and five minutes past twelve will not return on this same date and this same day. If it comes again, it will come on another day and another date. In the same way, what you and I are today, we shall not remain tomorrow. This is movement. Everything is moving. Time will not stop because of you or me.

Time always moves forward in its own way. In that course of time, Lalit Mohan had a son and a daughter. Sushobhita did not take up a job, but she looked after both children with great care. In any case, all facilities were available in America.

When the son and daughter were old enough, both were enrolled in school. Life there, that is, life in America, was not like the life of a farmer’s family in our country. Besides, Lalit Mohan himself, and Sushobhita too, paid proper attention to the children’s education.

Lalit Mohan and his wife had not received

citizenship there, that is, in America, but according to the rules and laws of that country, anyone born in America receives its citizenship. On that basis, both children, the son and the daughter, received citizenship of America.

Nishikant, Lalit Mohan's son, studied engineering and became an engineer, but his daughter Padmavati did not study science. She completed her MCom. The customs and culture of America are different from the customs and culture here. The influence that a family has on children here is different from what happens in America. After completing her BCom, Padmavati left the family without saying anything to her parents and married a businessman.

After finishing his studies, Nishikant looked at the salary and facilities and left America for a job in South Korea. Only the two of them, Lalit Mohan and Sushobhita, remained in the family.

Lalit Mohan had also bought his own house in America.

Time moved on. After thirty-five years of service, Lalit Mohan retired. Now both husband and wife had reached the downward slope of age. In other words, Lalit Mohan and Sushobhita were both over sixty. Lalit Mohan no longer had his work to occupy him.

Once life reached its downward slope, his village, his family, his country and his world began to dance before Lalit Mohan's mind, and the same happened

with Sushobhita. Lalit Mohan had become so used to the atmosphere of America and its way of life that his village society did return to his mind, but only as a memory. The reason it remained only a memory lay in his own life. From childhood, he had lived away from the family, spending his years in school and college. That is why he could not form the kind of bond with family and society that a person living within family and society forms.

From childhood until the age of twenty, Sushobhita had spent her time in a full and settled family. In the beginning, when she heard of going to America with her husband, Lalit Mohan, the thought of living there had attracted her. But after living there for some time, that feeling slowly began to fade. The thought of her own family and the ties of friendship and sisterhood in village society began to awaken in her mind so strongly that even a single day in America began to feel like a mountain. There is a quality in human beings that, wherever they may live, the pull of society draws them back. This same quality began to pull Sushobhita so deeply that she felt as if life in America was only being dragged along. She could clearly see that as the days passed, the strength of the body would go on decreasing, and many kinds of illness would surely overtake both of them. Then who would be there to support them in old age, that is, who would serve them in their last years?

Sushobhita could also see the importance elderly

people receive in families in her own country, that is, in India, and how family members serve them. That would not happen there. There she could see that even those who had children were often left by their sons and daughters and sent to old-age homes. Our country is not made only of soil and water but is made by the test of closeness in social and family life. There are many festivals in the year, and from family to society many duties and ceremonies take place, such as marriage, mundan, shraddh and so on.

Lalit Mohan's mind too was being pulled by his own family and his own society, but his own deeds and his way of thinking had placed him in a position where he had to endure this pain. Whom could he tell? Who was there to listen? Seeing their own future life, both husband and wife grew more and more anxious within themselves day by day. Lalit Mohan and Sushobhita could clearly see that there was no hope from their son or daughter. In Lalit Mohan's mind, his own actions stood before him. After going to America, he had done nothing to serve his own parents, and now he could see his own future in the same light. This is life. Some people shape their lives into a good form and accept death with a smile. Some receive death even before death comes, and then accept death while weeping. Kabir Das too has said that we came to this earth crying and should leave it smiling.

A year after retirement, the thoughts in Lalit Mohan's mind broke apart so completely that, in the

end, the couple sold their house and took the road back to the village.

The village they had left thirty-five years earlier had changed so much that, seeing it, both Lalit Mohan and Sushobhita began to wonder whether this was truly the village of their forefathers or whether they had come to some other village. Those who had seen them off when they left, along with their parents and elders, were no longer there. Nor had anything remained of the old face and shape of the village. Everything was unfamiliar from end to end. The village which once had no primary school now had a high school. The village which once had earthen embankment roads, that is, unpaved roads, now had paved roads on which large vehicles moved.

Today, it had been seven days since Lalit Mohan came to the village. His ancestral kin did give him a place to live, but Lalit Mohan himself had built nothing there. So, even among his own people, he felt like an outsider. The next generation of the village family knew Lalit Mohan by name and address, but in his life he had never done any good to anyone. Why, then, would anyone sit near him and tell him the story of his own life, or listen to the story of Lalit Mohan's life? Today, Lalit Mohan was truly seeing the village built by his forefathers. ❑

Nectar

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Nectar and poison are words with opposite meanings. One symbolises life, the other death. The word death is used to indicate the end of the life force in a person. The reason is that after death the body remains as it is, but the conscious power, that is, the life force, comes to an end. After death, therefore, the body no longer remains active as it was in life. It becomes inactive. The spiritual thinkers of our region have divided the body into three forms: the gross body, the subtle body and the causal body. The gross body dies, but the other two, that is, the subtle body and the causal body, do not die at once. Of course, after a certain span of time, the subtle and causal bodies also come to an end, but that process is not like the ordinary death that we see. Its basis is different, but we shall not discuss that subject here.

In common understanding, we take death to mean the end of the body's life force and conscious power. Death and nectar are two elements of life. The element of nectar in life is that which makes life truly

alive, while death is taken to be that state in which life exists but remains painful, surrounded by many kinds of disease, suffering and sorrow.

The element of nectar has been discussed in detail in the Bhagavata Mahapurana. In the seventh chapter of the eighth book of the Bhagavata Purana, the churning of the ocean is also described in detail. This story of the churning of the ocean has been told in our society not only today, but since ancient times, and it has spread into the thoughts of people at large. Shukadeva told Parikshit that the Gods and the demons together said to the serpent king Vasuki, "When nectar is obtained through the churning of the ocean, you too will have a share in it." On hearing of his share, the serpent king Vasuki agreed. After he agreed, both sides, the Gods and the demons, wrapped the serpent around Mount Mandarachal like a churning rope and made full preparations for the churning. Everyone's heart was filled with joy, for as soon as the ocean was churned, nectar would come out of it, and by drinking that nectar all of them would become immortal. After Vasuki was wrapped around Mount Mandarachal, Lord Ajit went towards Vasuki's mouth, and the Gods too gathered on that side. But seeing this act of the Lord, the leader of the demons did not like it. He objected and said, "The tail is the inauspicious part of a snake, so we shall not hold it."

Seeing the nature of the demons, the Lord smiled, left that part, that is, Vasuki's mouth, and held

Vasuki's tail along with the Gods.

In this way, after each side had fixed its place, everyone, the Gods and the demons, began to churn the ocean with full preparation in order to gain nectar. When the churning began, all the living creatures inside the ocean, such as fish, turtles, crocodiles and others, became disturbed on seeing the end of their lives before them. Anger began to rise among them. But seeing the play of the Gods and demons, they felt helpless and thought, what could they do now?

From the thousands of fiery eyes, mouths and breaths of the serpent king Vasuki, the fire of poison began to emerge. Because of its smoke, demons such as Poloma, Kaleya, Vali and Ilval lost their strength. They no longer had the power to churn the ocean. In the same way, the strength of the Gods also began to fade. Like the demons, the Gods too began to feel defeated and tired. Their clothes, garlands, armour and faces all began to lose their brightness, and it became impossible for the nectar to emerge.

After that, Lord Ajit himself began to churn the ocean. The ocean was churned, and from it came not only nectar but poison too.

There is also a common belief in society that the Gods and the demons sat together in agreement, and that the sharing of nectar began from the side of the Gods. The later account also speaks of Rahu and Ketu.

On this earth, that is, on the earth of human

beings, the churning of the ocean has not taken place only once. It has happened many times. But we shall not discuss that now. The question arises: what is the churning of the ocean?

Sitting at the outer doorway, I was thinking to myself that the Bhagavata Katha had been going on at the Brahmasthan for thirteen days and would end the day after tomorrow. Such a katha was not being held for the first time. It had been held every year in the month of Kartik. And not only at the Brahmasthan. Within the village community too, people had been holding it privately at their own doorways. Here I should also say that the Bhagavata Katha is not held in every village or at every doorway in society. It is held in some villages and at some doorways, and in many villages and at many doorways it is not held.

In our village, that is, in Krishnapur, at the Brahmasthan, meaning the Dihwar-sthan, the Bhagavata Katha has been held every year for many years. There is a Vedic scholar from the village itself. His name is Raghuvansh. Raghuvansh also teaches at a Sanskrit college. He begins the katha on the morning after Kartik Amavasya, that is, from the first day of the bright fortnight, and completes it on the day of the full moon. The people of Krishnapur give good support to Vyasa-ji. He receives support in both ways. First, every day after noon, in the late afternoon, people from the village come to listen to the katha. Second, whatever anyone can afford financially, they

give that too. After the Bhagavata Katha ends each day, aarti is performed and prasad is distributed, and this too comes through the support of society.

As I sat at the outer doorway thinking all this to myself, Kaladhar arrived. Kaladhar studies in college. As soon as he reached the doorway, he came near me and said, "Uncle, you look very worried!"

Kaladhar had said this after looking at my face. But I was not worried because of any family trouble, nor because of any personal illness. I was thinking about the Bhagavata Katha, and so my face had taken on a worried look. Seeing that, Kaladhar had spoken. I said, "My boy Kala, where am I worried? The Bhagavata Katha at the Brahmasthan came to my mind. I was thinking that in the society, that is, in the village, where the Bhagavata Katha has been held collectively every year, how much godliness has entered the society of that village?"

Kaladhar, a young boy of the new age and the new generation, asked, "Uncle, what is godliness?"

I did know a little about godliness, but just as an innocent child, when asked a question, loses trust in himself and becomes confused, and therefore cannot answer, the same happened to me. This too was rising in my mind: I had not studied beyond high school, while Kaladhar had been studying in college for five years. If I answered one question and he asked another immediately after it, what would I do? The

atmosphere has become such that people do not think or reflect at all. They spend the whole day making idle talk. So I felt it would be better to put the burden down and give the answer to Kaladhar in another way. I said, “My boy Kala, your understanding has grown so far ahead that mine is hardly fit to answer you. Even so, the same question is rising in my own mind too: what is godliness? So it would be better if both of us went and asked Brother Raghuvansh.”

Hearing my thought, Kaladhar paused. After a little while he said, “Very good.”

I said, “The Bhagavata Katha will end the day after tomorrow. It will not be proper to ask Brother Raghuvansh before that. His mind will now be tied to the next section, that is, to the next subject of the Bhagavata Katha. To ask him anything now would mean creating an obstacle in the thread of the subject. That would disturb the flow of his thought. So it will be better if you fix a time on the fourth or fifth day after the katha, and both of us will go and ask him.”

Just as I put forward my thought, Kaladhar agreed. He said, “Not on the fourth day. Fix the fifth day, because Uncle Raghuvansh will also be tired after fifteen days.”

On the fifth day, that is, on the third day after the Bhagavata Katha had ended, both of us, Kaladhar and I, reached Brother Raghuvansh’s place. Going near

him, I said, “I touch your feet, Brother.”

For fifteen days Brother Raghuvansh had been engaged in reading and explaining the Bhagavata Katha. Because of that, his voice had become hoarse. Even then, replying to my greeting, he said, “What effect did this year’s katha have on society, Jeevanand?”

I said, “Brother, just as bamboo or any other plant grows every year, and with that hardness and strength also enter it, in the same way something has entered you too. So the reading of the katha was very good, and its explanation was good as well.”

How could I tell him that the people of the village no longer truly came to listen to the Bhagavata Katha? These days, people go to public places to show off their fashion. Since I had spoken in a tone of praise, Brother Raghuvansh too became filled with happiness and said, “Jeevanand, many kinds of thoughts are in my mind, but I did not speak of them all. As I have been giving discourses every year, I gave the discourse this year too.”

I asked him, “How was the income this time?”

Brother Raghuvansh said, “The atmosphere had become such that people were forgetting worship and religious rites, and they were also becoming miserly in spending on them. That did not happen this time. Roughly understand it this way: what had come in during the last five years came this time alone. Cash

offerings came, and clothes and other things came too."

Seeing that time was passing in talk, Kaladhar seemed to be growing angry. Looking at his face, I said, "Brother, we have come with a question."

Brother Raghuvansh already had the joy of good income in his mind. When he heard of a question, greater happiness rose in him. He said, "What question?"

Hearing Brother Raghuvansh's eagerness for the question, Kaladhar said, "Uncle, what is godliness?"

On hearing Kaladhar's question, Brother Raghuvansh began to arrange the subject in his mind. Since a college student, Kaladhar, was asking, he wanted to answer in such a way that the wider meaning of the Bhagavata Mahapurana would become clear. Arranging the subject of the Bhagavata Mahapurana in his mind, Brother Raghuvansh said, "My boy Kala, to love the world, that is, to love everyone from human beings to other living creatures, is godliness. Just as numbers begin with one and two and then grow to hundreds, thousands, lakhs, crores, and then to arabs and kharabs, and just as letters begin with a and aa and then reach the shastras, puranas, upanishads and vedas, love in life also grows in the same way."

Kaladhar could not understand Brother Raghuvansh's thought properly, so he said, "Uncle,

please explain it a little more clearly."

Hearing Kaladhar's question, Brother Raghuvansh also began to think within himself. It arose in his mind that he was used to reading and explaining the Bhagavata Katha, and so he had spoken in his own way. But Kaladhar was not like that. Only when the answer was given in a way his mind could accept would he understand. Making the subject simple, Brother Raghuvansh said, "My boy, in this world, that is, in the world of life, love is the most precious thing. It means loving one another. The more love you have for someone, the more that person will come and live in your heart. You see it, and it is also clear before us, that thousands and lakhs of people die in the world every day, but do people feel pain for all of them? People feel pain only to the extent that someone close to them dies."

Kaladhar partly understood Brother Raghuvansh's thought and partly did not. I was there in between, so, supporting Brother Raghuvansh's thought, I said, "Yes, that is true."

Taking the subject forward, Brother Raghuvansh said, "Jeevanand, the main subject of the Bhagavata Mahapurana is the churning of the ocean. What is the churning of the ocean? It is this: how a human being may become truly human, gain humanity, and then become like a God. There are two directions in life. One is to gain the element of nectar, and the other is falling towards poison. When a person moves forward

on the good path in search of the element of nectar, good qualities such as love, compassion and kindness begin to enter him. One day, he reaches such a state that he becomes godlike and begins to live in everyone’s heart. The other path is the one by which a person reaches the state that is called demonic. As he becomes surrounded by evil qualities such as lust, anger, greed, attachment and hatred, he also becomes an object of hatred in the eyes of the world, that is, in the world of living beings.”

Hearing Brother Raghuvansh’s thought, Kaladhar let out a long breath, but said nothing. Understanding Kaladhar’s state of mind, Brother Raghuvansh spoke again, “My boy Kala, in the Ramayana, Tulsidas has said, ‘Hari is endless, and the stories of Hari are endless.’ Just as life is endless, the world too is endless. So it is not possible to understand everything at once. But this much is certainly possible: when you develop love for knowledge and begin to move forward in that direction, that is, when you become a lover of knowledge, then you will understand well what godliness is. For now, understand only this much: every human being wants life, wants knowledge, and wishes to live happily, freely and with self-discipline. Here, discipline does not mean ruling over others. It means disciplining oneself.” ❑

Time Has Passed

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After fifteen years, I came back to the village from Kolkata. I had gone to Kolkata in search of a job. After completing my BA, when I found no chance of employment in the village, I went to Kolkata with my maternal cousin. I did not get a government job there, but I found work in a foreign private pharmaceutical company. The salary was good, and the work came with proper facilities too. Six months after getting the job, I took my family there as well. My mother and father had already died, and in my own family line too, I was alone.

Compared with other cities, Kolkata is large, and land for building a house is also cheaper. As for other cities, I had only heard about them. I had not seen even one with my own eyes. How could I have seen them when I had neither gone anywhere nor lived anywhere else?

In the beginning, when I got the job, I began to live in a rented house. The family was small: only two children, one son and one daughter, and my wife was

with me. I worked eight hours in the company and, in the remaining time, gave private tuition for four hours.

At first, I did not understand Bengali, but Hindi was enough to manage. Slowly, I learnt Bengali. I used to teach children from our own region. Many people from our area, that is, from Bihar, live in Kolkata. Some work in government service, some in private companies, and many run their own businesses. There were also people who drove rickshaws and tempos, and those who worked as labourers and porters. They are still there.

The life I had known in the village before going to Kolkata had made me fully familiar with poverty. Because of that, I understood the value of money very well.

After working in Kolkata for a year, I bought one katha of land, thinking that I would build a house and live there. With time, my own life also kept moving forward. I took honesty as my duty and continued working in the company.

After a year and a half in the job, I was promoted. From an ordinary clerk, I became a responsible officer. My salary increased, and I began to receive many facilities from the company. This foreign pharmaceutical company worked in many cities across the country. Now more than half my time began to pass in travelling from Kolkata to other cities and back.

When I was promoted and began travelling to other cities for company work, I had to stop giving private tuition. I began to stay outside Kolkata for more than fifteen days a month. For travel outside the city, the company gave me more facilities, and my income also increased.

I enrolled both children in a private school next to our rented house. The elder one was my daughter and the younger one my son. There was a gap of two years between them. I enrolled both of them in the same school, one class apart.

My wife had not received a formal education. Now girls have begun to study in Mithila, but some years ago it was not so. Even now, in matters of education, our society is still behind, though boys still outnumber girls in schools and colleges.

Two years after coming to Kolkata, I built my own house. Once I had my own house, I left the rented house and began to live in my own place.

Time kept moving forward at its own pace. I did not even realise how fifteen years had passed. In the meantime, my daughter became old enough for marriage, and my son too began to study in college.

When my wife and I began to think about our daughter's marriage, a difference of opinion arose between us. My view was that since we had left the village and built a house in the city, that is, in Kolkata, we should arrange our daughter's marriage in Kolkata itself. There were many people from our own area

who worked in Kolkata and also ran their own businesses. Many had built their own houses too.

But my wife's view was that our daughter's marriage should be arranged in our own region, that is, in some village of Mithila.

The difference between our views arose from two different kinds of society.

There is still a distinct difference between the society of our region, that is, the society of Mithila, and the society of Bengal. Of course, when business grows in a village, people become educated and the form of the village begins to change, many differences naturally come in. Even within one family, we see that among the children of the same parents, if one brother studies and gets a job while another remains uneducated and lives as a farmer-householder, a difference appears in their conduct, thinking and way of life.

Even so, there are so many people from our region living in Kolkata that here too, in Kolkata, it often feels like a village. They are arranging the marriages of their sons and daughters here as well. People have also kept saying that wherever one settles, that place becomes one's beautiful land.

I had built my own house in Kolkata. I had a job, and life was going on. Still, my own village remained settled in my mind just as before. Even now, my mind believed that after retirement from service, I would live in the village.

I took one month's leave and came to the village. My own house and courtyard had fallen into ruins, but the homestead plot was still there. My wider clan family too was still in the village.

The village I had left when I went to Kolkata had changed a great deal by now. The village was spread over five hundred bighas. The value of the roads now built in the village was greater than the value of the entire village land at that time. I could see that when I had gone from the village to Kolkata, that is, fifteen years earlier, the average price of land in the village had been five hundred rupees per katha.

There had been three kinds of land in the village then, and there are three kinds even now. First, there was high land, considered suitable for building a house. The price of such land then was one thousand rupees per katha. Second, there was medium land, where a house could be built, but two or two and a half cubits of earth had to be filled in. The price of such land was five hundred rupees per katha. Third, there was low or chaura land, whose yield had no certainty and where water stayed for eight months of the year. The price of such land then was one hundred to two hundred rupees per katha.

Almost three-fourths of the total land of the village is chaura land. Roughly speaking, the roads now built in the village are worth more than the entire five hundred bighas of land were worth then. Along with that, many government buildings have also been

built.

Before coming to the village, when the thought of going there came into my mind, I thought that since I was going to the village, why should I not take clothes for all four families of my wider clan family? I had seen their condition fifteen years earlier. I had seen that just as there was a shortage of food and drink in family after family, there was also a shortage of clothes and proper houses to live in. After coming to Kolkata, my own life had improved, but the families in the village would still be the same as I had seen them. Thinking this, I bought clothes for all twenty-eight people of the four families, from children to the elderly, and brought them with me to the village.

As soon as I reached the village, I went to the doorway of my close paternal cousin. My own house was just beside it, but it had collapsed in such a way that it was no longer fit to live in. Mithila is still the same Mithila, where manners, thought and behaviour may not be fully alive in every form, but they are still alive at least in part. As soon as I reached my cousin's doorway, elder brother's wife recognised me. I recognised her too. Before I could even sit at the doorway, elder brother's wife came near me with water in a lota-pot. I placed my bag on the cot, bowed to her and said, "elder brother's wife, did you recognise me or not?"

Smiling, she said, "These are still the days when people recognise their own people even on a dark

night. Why would I not recognise you? Tell me how the children are."

I said, "By your blessings, everyone is well. Tell me the news of your family."

Bhabhiji and I were still asking after each other when Anuradha, my niece, arrived with tea. When I had gone to Kolkata, Anuradha was only a four-year-old child. Now she had become old enough for marriage, so I hesitated a little in recognising her. But when Anuradha placed the glass of tea on the cot, touched my feet and said, "Uncle," I looked at her carefully and remembered that she was my niece, two years older than my own daughter.

We were still exchanging news when Sone Bhai, my paternal cousin, arrived on a bicycle, carrying rice and wheat from the ration dealer in sacks. Looking at the sacks, I guessed that they must have contained more than fifty kilos of rice and wheat. Sone Bhai stopped the bicycle in front of the doorway. From his face, I felt that he had grown old. But I said nothing. I touched his feet and bowed, thinking within myself that, of course, people grow old with age, but poverty and worry are also such illnesses that, just as a mango ripens before its proper time, a human being too grows old before time due to poverty and anxiety.

Taking both sacks of rice and wheat down from the bicycle, Sone Bhai placed them on the verandah of the courtyard and came to the doorway. He said, "Is

all the news good, my boy?"

I said, "Yes, everything is all right. What is the news here?"

Smiling, Sone Bhai said, "Because of the drought, farming has been ruined, but with the grain given by the government, we are somehow living. Still, we are children of a farming family. As the saying goes, a small pot holds seventy-two hopes. The hope of production of crop from the fields has not been lost, but the income from the cows is good. Somehow, five hundred rupees a day comes in."

Calculating at five hundred a day, I thought to myself that his monthly income was fifteen thousand.

The next morning, I said to Sone Bhai, "Brother, I have come with a particular matter in mind."

Sone Bhai asked, "What kind of matter?"

I said, "My daughter has become old enough for marriage. I am thinking of arranging her marriage on our own soil and water, here in Mithila. Of course, there are many Maithil families in Kolkata too, but that is still Bengal."

Smiling, Sone Bhai said, "That time is no longer there. I see people arranging their daughters' marriages in the village, and after marriage the daughters leave the village and go to live somewhere else. So arranging a daughter's marriage with that old belief is not really suitable for the time."

Hearing his view, I too felt that he was right. We

see such things day and night. My thinking changed.

In the late afternoon, after waking from sleep and drinking tea, when I looked towards the village, Siyaram's family came to my mind. When I used to live in the village, our family had friendly relations with Siyaram's family. Siyaram was as hardworking as he was honest.

I asked Sone Bhai, "Brother, is Siyaram alive, or has he died?"

Becoming sad, Sone Bhai said, "You may as well think of him as dead."

I asked, "What do you mean, Brother?"

Sone Bhai said, "The old liveliness of Siyaram is no longer there. He has two sons, and both work in Mumbai. Only the two of them, husband and wife, live alone in the village."

Hearing the news of Siyaram from Brother's mouth, greater curiosity rose in my mind. I remembered the help Siyaram had given us in village life. I said, "Brother, if you are free, let both of us go to Siyaram's place."

Both of us set out to meet Siyaram. His house was only a little way from ours, in another tola. When we reached Siyaram's place, I saw that both of them, husband and wife, were sitting at the doorway and talking. Looking at their faces, I felt that both had become completely worn out with age. The light of their eyes too had grown weak.

As soon as I reached the doorway, I said in a shaky voice, “Siyaram Bhai, I am Ravikant.”

Hearing my name, Siyaram Bhai was startled and said, “My boy, I had not even the slightest hope that I would ever see your face. But God’s ways are boundless, and I have met you.”

Seeing Siyaram Bhai’s condition, I felt that if I asked him about the past, about things from fifteen years earlier, it would be like sprinkling salt on a wound. So I did not ask that. I said, “Brother, this is how the world goes on. A child is born, grows from infancy into youth, becomes old and then dies.”

Hearing me, Siyaram Bhai burst into tears. Weeping, he began to speak, “Ravi, my boy, what a world I once had! There was farming, and there was trade too. In society, who did not receive help from this body of mine? But everything has gone!”

I said, “Brother, this is the way of the world. Can anyone stop what must move on?”

Siyaram Bhai said, “My boy, my time has passed. Just as the plough and oxen have gone from farming, tyre-carts have taken over the carrying of loads and passengers. When the trade broke down, my hands and feet became useless. What a time it was, and what has become of it now! Still, as long as food and water are written for me on this earth, I live. The day that writing is erased, I shall go from here. It is good that I have at least seen your face.” ❑

What Time Demands

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In a dynamic world, everything is subject to change. Anything that does not keep pace with time meets the same fate as dry leaves and twigs swept away by a rush of water and left on the bank. Life too moves in the same way. From ancient times, this has always happened: any living being that cannot adjust its movement according to time disappears. It is destroyed.

We are living today in the twenty-first century. If we do not make ourselves active according to what this century demands, that is, according to what present life demands, we shall be destroyed. We shall be pushed aside by time. Neelam, an MA student, was sitting in her hostel room, thinking to herself that the examination would take place after three months. The life she had lived so far, her student life, had now reached its limit and would soon enter the next phase, that is, family life.

As soon as the thought of entering family life came near, Neelam's mind paused. If someone else

had been in the room, she would have turned her thought into a question and sought an answer, but there was no one there. Suddenly, it arose in Neelam's mind that the way families had been formed in society until now did have some virtues, and it could not be said that it had no faults. It had faults too. At this point, around virtues and faults, Neelam's thought paused again. Her thought was held firmly by the present, yet it could not be said that the past had no part in building the present. It certainly had.

Suddenly, Neelam's thought reached that unit of society where she herself stood as one part of her own society. There are billions of human beings on earth. At that moment, she was not thinking of all embodied living beings. She was thinking only of human beings. Billions of human beings live thousands upon thousands of different forms of life. They live in many countries, in many climates, among many kinds of societies. All at once, Neelam's thought moved away from the world and came to rest on her own village society.

Our own society, the society of Mithila, has not been formed only today. It has been taking shape for thousands of years. In this society, there are some virtues, and there are faults as well. Of course, society has always moved between virtues and faults, and it will continue to move in this way. In the meantime, wisdom surely lies in removing and changing faults and bad qualities, and moving towards good qualities.

When good qualities enter life, the thoughts, behaviour and life of society too will acquire a better tendency. But how will good qualities come? How will good behaviour take shape? This question stands before us.

The more Neelam swam in the sea of life and society, the more she saw both good and bad in her thoughts. She could not see any one direction or path clearly, a path made wholly of good qualities or wholly of bad qualities. On the same path, both good and bad could be seen. Just as a traveller in a dense forest cannot see the path because of the thickness of the forest, Neelam too could not see any clear and straight path in the dense forest of life, a path that would be the easiest and most proper for life. The same path seemed both good and bad. In the end, Neelam could not reach the boundary of the thought that had been rising in her mind. She came out of her hostel room and began to walk in the open ground under the sky.

The easterly wind was moving gently. It was the month of Phagun, so the weather had become pleasant.

Being a student of sociology, Neelam had in her mind the structure and bonds of society from Satya Yuga, the Age of Truth, from ancient times, up to the present age. When thoughts of Satya Yuga began to rise and turn in Neelam's mind, the practice of swayamvara came to her naturally. As soon as the

thought of swayamvara system came, a new kind of scene seemed to descend before Neelam's mind. After that new scene, a storm began to rise in her mind. In the structure of today's society, the way a family is formed is this: a boy, or a man, of a certain caste forms a marriage relation with a girl, or a woman, of the same caste. Society has accepted this gladly.

Among the questions that had been rising and turning in Neelam's mind until now, a thin light also began to appear. She saw that in a society where caste bonds are so strong, if a marriage relation is formed between two different castes, society opposes it. Because of this, even very serious incidents take place in society. Many people and many families have been destroyed in such events, and many are still being destroyed. In speech, however, everyone says that human beings have only one caste. All are human, and the caste bond that has been made among them is a deception, an illusion. In the course of thought, this too arose in Neelam's mind: if society had accepted the practice of swayamvara on the basis of merit, and if such examples had continued from Satya Yuga through Treta Yuga to Dvapara Yuga, and everyone had accepted them on the authority of the shastras and puranas, then how did that practice become unlawful in Kali Yuga? How did a practice accepted from kings to common people become unacceptable?

In the present atmosphere, in the atmosphere of thought within society, everyone considers Lord Rama supreme. His marriage, that is, the formation of his family, took place between two different castes or social lineages. In such a society, why are people opposing this thought, the thought of inter-caste marriage? Even now, in village society, we see that where a man has gained great qualities of learning, his wife is either only ordinarily educated or not educated at all. Can this not be called inequality in the formation of a family? If, in a two-wheeled cart, one wheel is strong and beautiful and the other weak and ugly, what kind of movement can that cart have? Will it move according to the speed and strength of the man, or according to the speed of the woman?

Being a student of sociology, Neelam was looking at the scriptural subject on one side and society on the other. The difference between the two was so deep that Neelam became entangled in it, and no path could be seen clearly before her.

Last month, an article by Shambhu Sharan had been published in a national magazine. In that article, the social and economic condition of the country from 1701 to 2010 had been discussed in detail. By chance, that magazine came into Neelam's hands. Many articles by many scholars had been published in the magazine, but Shambhu Sharan's article, "Indian Society and Its Economic Analysis," was the longest and the most serious.

Shambhu Sharan was a student of economics. In his research-based article, he had analysed Indian society and its economy very well. He was only an MA student, yet he had prepared the article with great hard work. As soon as the magazine came into Neelam's hands, she read it from beginning to end. After reading it, Shambhu Sharan's article affected her mind so deeply that she read it three times in a row. The first reading affected her. The second reading affected her even more. After the second reading, because the subject was serious, her hunger grew sharper, and when she read it for the third time, Indian society and its economic condition became clearly visible before her eyes.

Being a student of sociology, Neelam felt that she should establish contact with Shambhu Sharan. The time had become such that mobile phones had reached the hands of most people. Under the author's name printed in the magazine, Shambhu Sharan's mobile number was also given. Neelam called Shambhu Sharan and said, "After reading your article in the magazine, the tangled knot in my mind has been loosened. For that, I thank you again and again."

Hearing Neelam's words of praise, Shambhu Sharan said, "You are praising the writer, but you have not introduced yourself."

Neelam said, "I am an MA student of sociology, and my name is Neelam."

Shambhu Sharan asked, "Which college are you

studying in, and which village is your home?"

Neelam said, "I am studying at C.M. College, and my village is Prempur. And you?"

Shambhu Sharan said, "I too am studying for my MA at L.S. College, Muzaffarpur. I am a student of economics, and my village is Navnagar."

On hearing "Navnagar", Neelam was startled. Prempur and Navnagar fall in the same subdivision. Neelam said, "Who all are there in your family?"

Shambhu Sharan said, "My mother and father are there, and we are three brothers and sisters. My brother and sister are both younger than me. Now tell me about yourself."

Neelam said, "Just as your parents are alive, mine are alive too. Among five brothers and sisters, I am the fourth. I have one younger brother, who studies in high school. Two brothers and one sister are older than me. My elder sister and both brothers are married. Both brothers work in Mumbai, and my sister lives at her husband's home."

Shambhu Sharan said, "Many thanks to you for calling. At present, I am busy preparing for the examination, so I shall not talk much now."

Six months passed. The MA results of both Shambhu Sharan and Neelam were announced. Just as Shambhu Sharan topped the MA, Neelam too topped. After the results came out, Shambhu Sharan received offers of teaching posts from two or three

private colleges, but he had not joined any of them yet, as he was waiting for a post in a government college.

Now Neelam's mind had accepted that Shambhu Sharan was a better student than she was. If a marriage relation could be formed with him, then her life too would become like a living stream flowing on and finally joining the sea. In the same way, her life would join that sea of social equality, alive with affection. The thought of a marriage relation with Shambhu Sharan had entered Neelam's mind, but at once the caste structure of society surrounded her thought.

Many kinds of thoughts were rising in Neelam's mind like bubbles in the rainwater of Sawan, and they were bursting by themselves. Fifteen days passed in this confusion.

On the sixteenth day, Neelam's thought became so strong that she picked up the phone and said to Shambhu Sharan, "I have a proposal."

Hearing "I have a proposal", Shambhu Sharan at once asked, "What proposal?"

Neelam said, "If a marriage relation is formed between the two of us, life would take on a new colour."

Hearing Neelam's proposal, and keeping the bonds of society in view, Shambhu Sharan said, "Even if there is oneness of thought between us, the caste

distance is so great that it becomes a curse for society. So how can such a proposal be accepted?"

Just as Neelam could see a bright future in her thought, the history of society, the practice of swayamvara, was also moving before her mind. Along with this, her age, being above eighteen, was giving strength to her thought, and from within, Neelam's courage was becoming firm.

On the other side, Shambhu Sharan had already seen such incidents in his own village society where, because of inter-caste marriage, whole families had been destroyed. In this conflict, Shambhu Sharan's mind was full of fear.

In the meantime, Neelam said, "What can I teach you? You already know everything. It may be that this thought has not come before your eyes."

With curiosity, Shambhu Sharan said, "Which thought?"

In a serious voice, Neelam said, "Just as one society, the society of a village, has certain rights different from those of another village society, in the same way, within the society of one village, one family too has rights different from another family."

In the middle, Shambhu Sharan said, "Yes, that is true. But how many families in society understand such a thought? We see that people in society sometimes rush in one direction like a flock of sheep, and at other times, when an important matter has to

be solved, they hide their heads. Such is our society."

Taking the thought forward, Neelam said, "Within the family too, a person has some independent rights. Of course, it will be better first to place the proposal for one's independent life before the family. But if the family does not accept it, then for one's bright future, one can certainly use one's individual right."

Accepting Neelam's thought, Shambhu Sharan said, "Yes, that can be done. But not now. We shall think about what comes next in the days ahead." ❑

O God, It Ends in Despair

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By the time Shivnath entered college, he had become fully convinced that, after completing his education, he would take up a job somewhere nearby and, while serving his parents, would also serve society and the people of his village as far as possible.

Even now, such contradictory ideas are spread among the people of our society that they are unable to see any clear direction. The contradiction is this: in thought, every person carries the belief that one should live as good a human being as possible. Economically, however, the life of most people until now has been a life of want. Because of poverty, there has been a lack of almost everything in life. For life, one certainly needs enough money to eat one’s fill, clothes to cover the body, and a house in which one can protect oneself from the cold of winter, the monsoon rains and the heat of summer. Of course, one also needs medicine and treatment in illness, and

education for knowledge. But illness has no fixed and certain basis in the way hunger needs food, the body needs clothes, and winter, rain and heat require a house for protection. The same applies to education. Reading and writing are the needs of a developed society. In a society where the main basis of life is farming and keeping cattle such as cows and buffaloes, education does not hold so much importance. Farming and cattle-rearing are carried on through bodily labour. So the basic needs of life are food, clothing and shelter, while health and education are supplementary needs. Yet these five–food, clothing, shelter, health and education–are also basic needs. Everyone accepts this, and people do say that life has five basic needs.

The society of today, or the society that is being formed today, is different from the earlier society. That was the time of kings and local rulers. In those days, the main basis of wealth and property was land and farming. I am not speaking here about the grabbing of land. I am saying only this much: before the present time, the main basis of livelihood in this region was farming. The fields of village after village had become concentrated in the hands of kings, local rulers, landlords and a few large farmers who held the fields and lands of villages. The rest of the people had only a little land. Most people were such that, let alone land for farming, they did not even have enough space to build a house. On one side, in thought,

people held the idea that if someone came to the doorway, he should be fed and, as far as possible, served. On the other side, their economic condition was such that they had no means to feed even themselves and their families. I am not speaking here of floods and droughts. I am speaking only of the deep contradiction that existed in the minds and lives of people in the past. On one side, they had generous thoughts. On the other side, there was such poverty that, let alone one evening, they often had to remain hungry for many days.

The earlier generations were the product of such a time and such a life. Life cannot run only on moral teaching. To sustain life, the means of life must be present. Their absence remained in our society not for five or ten years, but generation after generation. Because of this, just as people died from diseases of the body, they also died from hunger. In this same contradictory society, Shivnath was born into an ordinary farming family in Vikrampur village.

From childhood, Shivnath was good at his studies. His mind was sharp, and he took study as his duty. Because of this, he never failed in his student life. Of course, Shivnath never stood among the top students in his class, but he passed with good marks and also passed matriculation in the second division. His own wish was to study up to BA, and his father, Damodar, wished the same. Until then, only two people in the village had passed BA, and they were

teaching in a high school. If Shivnath too passed BA, he would surely become a teacher in some high school. This would increase the family's honour, and the family would also be maintained properly. Along with that, his father's own respect in society would also rise, as people would say that he had educated his son very well.

Driven by his own wish and his father's hope, Shivnath passed BA. As long as he was studying, his mind was filled with deep faith that the farming life his family had lived so far would now surely move forward.

After passing BA, Shivnath tried day and night to find a job, but he did not get one.

In society, Shivnath was not the only one. There are thousands and lakhs of educated people who are drifting about because of unemployment. On one side, farming life is such that uneducated people are doing it. On the other side, if educated people wish to do the same work, society will laugh at them. This is natural too. Why would someone who has studied do the work that uneducated people are doing? The condition of society and the country was such that there were no means of employment. Of course, if the country had developed properly, such want would not have remained, but that did not happen. As long as the country was under foreign rule, until before 1947, why would the foreign rulers develop the country? Later, when the country became free in 1947, power

passed into the hands of rulers, landlords, factory owners and capitalists. Though they belonged to the country, they too did not allow the country to develop properly.

After passing BA, Shivnath kept trying for a job for eight continuous years, but he did not get one. Despair began to surround him. Yet Shivnath was not alone in this. There were lakhs of educated young men like him. In the end, Shivnath decided to leave the village and go outside, to a city in another state, in search of work. By then he had two children, and his parents had also passed away. Leaving the village, Shivnath went to Bangalore. Until some time earlier, people from our region, people of Mithila, used to go to Calcutta for work. But with changing times, more people had now begun to go to Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore for jobs.

Shivnath got a job in transport. The life Shivnath had lived until then was full of want from end to end. What poverty means and what the life of a poor person is like, Shivnath had learnt very well from his own life. He had fully experienced what happens to a person who longs for food and water. In Bangalore, there are many large transport businessmen. When Shivnath got a job with one such businessman, he began to save whatever he could from his salary. After six months, he brought a little happiness into his life.

After getting the job, Shivnath began sending money from his salary home every month. After six

months, he came to the village and took his wife and both children with him to Bangalore.

The thought he had carried in his mind, that he would live his life in village society, broke apart.

In Bangalore, Shivnath enrolled both his children in a good school. In pursuit of money, Shivnath began to work like a madman, not knowing day from night and giving as much time as possible to work. After a year, he bought a house.

Money began to pour in like the rains of Sawan. After getting his own house, Shivnath bought a car for himself, and only three years after that he also bought a truck. This increased his income even more.

As Shivnath's income kept increasing, his hunger for money also kept increasing. By the time eight years had passed, he had bought two more trucks and two buses. Of course, the thought also began to come into his mind that he should leave the job and run his own business. But having seen the income from the job, he did not do so.

Time kept slipping by. Now Shivnath's two children had also grown up, and his wife too, living in the air and water of Bangalore, had become capable enough to look after their business. Just as everything moves in its own way, Shivnath's thoughts too were moving in their own way.

By the time fifteen years had passed, a turn came in Shivnath's thinking. The turn was this: the hunger

for collecting money that had been in his mind until now began to find a little satisfaction, a little contentment. Slowly, that contentment grew. Thinking within himself, one day Shivnath decided that he would no longer live in Bangalore. When he had enough capital to do business, why should he not go to his own village and run his business there? Shivnath said to his wife, "Now I shall not live here in Bangalore. When we have capital and a healthy body, we can live in any corner of the world."

Just as a patient who has suffered from some disease, even after becoming well and healthy, continues to avoid such food and such actions as may bring the disease back and put life in danger, so too one must be careful. For as long as life remains, as long as we are alive, this world is ours. Once the eyes are closed, where the world goes, no one can say.

Shivnath's wife, Sumitra, speaking from the experience of her earlier life, said to her husband, "In the life we have lived so far, we have seen village life, and we are also seeing the life here, in Bangalore. Wherever we live, if we live with happiness and peace, that is life, is it not? So why do you bring into your mind, without need, the thought that we should go to the village, run our own business there and live well?"

Shivnath's thought had already gained maturity. So within himself, he was feeling that when even dogs and cats, without understanding, live their lives, then a human being is, after all, a human being. A human

being has intelligence, judgement and endless power to work. If, after being born human, someone does not serve human beings and society, if he does not understand human beings as human and help them for their welfare, then what kind of human being is he, and what kind of life is that? In the same way, if one leaves the family and society built by one's forefathers and spends life only in pursuit of one's own stomach, then what kind of life is that? It is true that the society and family in which he was born and brought up were backward compared with this place, Bangalore. But who will take forward those who are backward? They will move forward only through that same society.

Thinking and reflecting in this way, Shivnath completed twenty years in Bangalore. The love of the village suddenly became so strong in his mind that he decided he would leave for the village the day after tomorrow.

The pull of the village drew Shivnath so strongly that now he did not feel good staying in Bangalore even for a moment. His two sons too had grown up. They were now looking after the business properly.

Before coming to the village, it arose in Shivnath's mind that he should first go alone and build a house to live in. Once the house was ready, he would ask his wife to come too. If she came, that would be good. If she did not, that too would be all right. Thinking this, Shivnath left for the village on the third day.

As soon as he came to the village, Shivnath remembered his friends from twenty years earlier. He had seven families in his own family line. The condition of all those seven families had also improved from what it had been twenty years earlier. Shivnath went to his paternal cousin, Raghunath. According to the traditional behaviour of our region, Raghunath treated Shivnath as a member of his own family and made all arrangements for his stay.

The mobile age has brought at least this much ease: even money transactions can now be done through the mobile phone. Shivnath said to Raghunath, "My younger, who all do the work of building houses in the village?"

Raghunath said, "Elder brother, seven or eight people in the village do this work, but Devshankar is the most honest of them and also completes work on time. Within one and a half to two months, he will build whatever kind of house you want."

In the morning, Shivnath went with Raghunath to Devshankar's place and gave him the responsibility of building the house.

Shivnath had his own homestead plot. The next day, Devshankar began work on the house.

It was four o'clock. Shivnath and Raghunath were sitting at the doorway and drinking tea. Shivnath asked Raghunath, "Is Sarup Bhai alive, or has he died?"

Raghunath said, "He is alive, but only in name."

Hearing the thought of being dead while still alive, Shivnath was startled. It arose in his mind: what did this mean, being counted as dead while alive? But controlling his mind, Shivnath said, "My younger, Sarup Bhai is my childhood friend. Let both of us go and meet him."

The sun had set. The two brothers, Shivnath and Raghunath, reached Sarup's place. Sarup was sitting alone at the doorway, lost in worry. It had grown dim, and Sarup's eyesight too had become weak. As soon as he reached the doorway, Shivnath said, "I touch your feet, Sarup Bhai. I am Shivnath."

Hearing Shivnath's name, Sarup strained his memory. Which Shivnath? As if he had forgotten Shivnath, he said, "Which Shivnath?"

Shivnath remained silent. But introducing Shivnath, Raghunath said, "Have you forgotten Shivnath Bhai?"

Hearing Raghunath, Sarup said, "I have grown old now, haven't I? So the light of my eyes has faded, and my memory too has grown weak. How are you, Shivnath? When did you come to the village?"

Shivnath said, "I came the day before yesterday."

Sarup asked, "Are your children all well and happy?"

Shivnath said, "Yes, everything is all right."

All at once, Sarup began to weep. Seeing Sarup

weep, Shivnath wondered what had happened to Sarup Bhai that he had started crying like this. Giving him words of comfort, Shivnath said, “Brother, good and bad things happen in life. Why do you cry for that?”

In Sarup Bhai’s mind there was a wish to tell Shivnath all the pain of his sorrow, but he held it back within himself and said, “Shivnath, I lost my way because I did not understand life as life.”

Shivnath could not understand what kind of wound Sarup Bhai had in his mind that he was crying like this. Shivnath said, “Brother, why are you weeping?”

Sarup Bhai said, “I shall tell you from the beginning, Shivnath. Until I tell you everything about my life, neither will the pain in my mind lessen, nor will you be able to understand.”

Hearing Sarup Bhai’s thought, Shivnath remained silent. From this, Sarup Bhai felt that Shivnath wished to hear his words and thoughts. Sarup Bhai said, “Shivnath, whether you remember or not, I remember everything. So I shall speak from the beginning. I had passed matriculation in the second division. You must remember that too?”

Hearing Sarup Bhai, Shivnath said, “Yes, I do remember. I was two batches behind you.”

Sarup Bhai said, “The practice of dowry and marriage exchange had begun in society.”

Hearing Sarup Bhai's thought, Shivnath put pressure on his memory, and he remembered that dowry had been in practice even before that. In the age of Treta, Rama too had received much wealth at the time of his departure from Janakpur, and Tulsidas has also described it. But it was not in the form in which dowry has taken shape in the present time. Shivnath said, "Yes, it had begun."

Sarup Bhai said, "After passing matriculation, I got a job in a lower primary school. Matchmakers began to come with marriage proposals. By chance, one matchmaker came from a family that had twelve bighas of land and only two daughters, no son. He told all this to my father. My father was a man of old ideas. He said that since there was no son there, we would not form a marriage relation with that family. But I thought that out of twelve bighas of land, there would be a share of six bighas. Even if the land sold at two thousand rupees a katha, it would still be a large amount. So I pressed my father and married there. My father-in-law had three brothers. By chance, when my father-in-law died, I thought of selling that land and buying land in my own village. Thinking this, I went to my in-laws' place. There, when I started talking of selling the land, the sons of those two brothers, that is, my father-in-law's nephews, began to quarrel. They said clearly that it was the property of their family line, and they would not give me even one dhur. I filed a case in court for my share. The case is still lying there

as it was. Whatever salary I received from my job went into the case. With my own earnings, I neither built a house nor did anything else. One day, I had gone to court for a hearing. They beat me there in the court itself and warned me that if I came again, they would kill me. I have now retired from service too. Now, when I turn back and look, I remember Vidyapati's words: 'Madhav, my end is despair.'"

Sarup Bhai fell silent. I could think of nothing. After a short while, I said, "Brother, I shall go now." ❑

Fear

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Fear has existed in the human mind not merely today, but since ancient times. Yet it cannot be said that everyone feels fear in the same way. There are some people who begin to be fearless from childhood, and as they grow older, they become still more fearless and brave. Suddenly, a question arose in my mind: what, after all, is fear, that the mind remains afraid all the time?

Sitting alone at the doorway, I began to think within myself: why do I feel so much fear that my mind always seems to remain frightened? I am not used to meditating, so that I could sit in meditation and think about fear. Suddenly, my own mind said that the world is so dense and complex, does everyone understand it? Those who practise meditation think of many things while meditating, but those who do not have that practice cannot think about, or even properly see, the scene or thought that lies directly before their eyes. My mind accepted that I too was like that. At once, another thought arose in my mind: if I

cannot understand or see a thought or a scene myself, why should I not understand it from someone else? My mind agreed that I should ask someone and clear the doubt about the fear within me.

When the thought came that I should ask someone else and find an answer to the doubt about fear in my mind, I lifted my eyes and looked towards society, towards the people of the village, wondering who there might be whose answer could remove the fear from my mind.

There are many people in the village whom one can ask. Then another thought came to my mind: among people too there is this habit that even those who do not understand a thing will say something if they are asked. If they speak correctly, then the question of fear may be resolved. But if they themselves do not understand the right thing, then they will say something that may become still more frightening and create more fear. A strange condition took hold of my mind, and my confusion grew further. Suddenly, it arose in my mind that it would be better not to place complete trust in one person alone. If the same question were asked to more than one person, some right point would surely be found. This too arose in my mind: neither is the right thing of only one kind, nor is the wrong thing of only one kind. In such a situation, how would I understand whether one person was speaking wrongly and another rightly? My mind felt a little comfort.

After that comfort, when I again began to think within myself, the thought came that just as false ideas have no limit, sound ideas too have no fixed limit. This means that according to the level of life, just as a sound idea keeps refining its form and becomes better and better, a false idea, moving backwards and remaining unrefined, grows in a wrong direction and becomes still more terrible. My mind became so tangled between these two kinds of thought that I could not form any clear idea. In the end, this thought arose in my mind: in society, people already hold the belief that what one does not understand oneself, one should ask a second or third person and then think over what one has heard. Then another thought came to my mind: the past has already gone by, so I can neither see it fully nor understand it fully. But what is in the present can be seen and understood according to time. My mind accepted this. Once my mind accepted it, I rose from the doorway and set out towards the village.

After rising from the doorway, when I moved ahead and came on to the village road, I thought of what I myself knew, what I had heard, and what others too said: that in the village the most knowledgeable and honest person was Raghuvansh Kaka. So it would be better to go to his place and ask him. I would tell him everything, that fear had always remained inside my mind, and ask what the reason for it was.

Raghuvansh Kaka's house is in another tola. It is about one kilometre from my house. As I walked along the road, I kept thinking within myself about what I would ask Raghuvansh Kaka. Of course, this thought too was coming into my mind: I myself would ask Raghuvansh Kaka my question, but if he asked me something in order to understand what I meant, I myself would have to answer that too. Thinking in this way, I kept moving step by step. I forgot the walking itself and reached Raghuvansh Kaka's doorway. Seeing his doorway, it was as if a closed door in my mind had opened.

Raghuvansh Kaka was sitting at the doorway. Until then, neither had I said anything nor had he spoken. Moving forward, when I reached the verandah of his doorway, I said, "I touch your feet, Kaka."

As soon as I said this, Raghuvansh Kaka blessed me and said, "Stay well, my boy. What is the matter?"

I said, "Uncle, I have come to ask you about something troubling my mind."

Sitting on the wooden cot, Raghuvansh Kaka said, "Come, come, sit here."

He said this with his mouth and also showed me the place in front with a gesture of his hand. Just as he showed me where to sit, I sat in front of him and said, "Uncle, fear has always remained inside my mind. If I ever go to the Block Office for some work, I begin to

tremble inwardly as soon as I see the BDO. In the same way, as evening falls, that is, as soon as the sun sets and darkness begins to spread, fear begins to enter my mind. Because of that, I do not go anywhere in the dark, nor do I step out from the doorway without a light."

Raghuvansh Kaka listened carefully to what I said and began to think within himself. Though I had asked him, he did not answer at once. After thinking for a little while, he said, "Sinheshwar, the problem that has arisen in your mind cannot be solved in haste. For this, we shall have to sit for some time and think. Only then will there be an answer."

Just as a sick person, a person suffering from disease of the body, removes time from his mind and thinks that whatever time is needed for examination and testing may be taken, but somehow the illness must be treated, in the same way I fixed this firmly in my mind: even if the whole day passed in understanding it, I would leave only after understanding. I said, "Uncle, first of all, I do not do any such family work that my absence would create any difficulty at home. Second, the work for which I have come now, that is, to think and understand, must be done before I go. Let whatever time is needed be taken. If my mind is not satisfied in one day, I shall come again the next day. If it is not satisfied on the second day either, I shall come again on the third day. But I have to satisfy my mind."

Raghuvansh Kaka said, “Sinheshwar, there are two questions together. The first is that there is too much fear in your mind. The second is that you feel fear even when you go to a government office. You said that when you go to the Block Office for some work, you begin to feel afraid. The two questions have two directions. First understand the matter of the Block Office.”

I said in between, “Please tell me, uncle.”

Raghuvansh Kaka said, “Our society until now has remained backward in the field of education. Because of that, people do not understand the ways and methods of government offices, and so they feel more fear.”

I could not understand Raghuvansh Kaka’s rounded statement properly, so I said, “Please explain it a little more clearly.”

Raghuvansh Kaka said, “Sinheshwar, the minds of most people are surrounded by the cruelty of authority. Such and such a king or such and such a ruler behaved cruelly towards the ruled, that is, towards ordinary people. Understand it in this way: the person sitting on the chair does not take the work of ordinary people as work. He behaves as if a beggar has come asking for alms. You will see that he may sit the whole day without any work, talking with others, but he will not even look at you or at your work. For now, understand this much. Now come to the second question.”

After hearing Raghuvansh Kaka's thought, the doubt in my mind was not fully removed, but hope certainly remained. I said, "Yes, please explain that."

Raghuvansh Kaka said, "People feel fear for two reasons. First, fear comes from seeing or hearing of an event ahead. Second, fear comes from imagination. When one sees a fast vehicle coming from the front, fear arises in the mind that it may hit us. For that, one should remain alert and move aside. There is also fear of natural disaster. For that too, one should think of a remedy according to the kind of danger. When people learn to remain alert, such fears disappear from the mind by themselves. The second kind of fear is imaginary. From the mouths of their forefathers, people have always heard frightening tales of ghosts, spirits, demons and such beings. Because of this, the mind becomes so full of doubt that it keeps trembling with fear all the time. Such fear will not leave the mind until one's conscious awareness becomes strong."

Hearing Raghuvansh Kaka's thought, a little relief came into my mind. My lowered eyes rose and met his eyes. Raghuvansh Kaka understood this. Understanding it, he spoke further, "Imaginary fear means fear born from imagination, and fear is also born from illusion. For instance, a person may mistake a rope for a snake. In our society too, people have long used this example to explain illusion. This is complete delusion."

Suddenly, it came out of my mouth, “Yes, people do say that.”

Raghuvansh Kaka went on, “There are seven chakras in the body, and one of them is the Manipura chakra. A person whose Manipura chakra is weak feels more fear. Second, people also feel more fear when conditions are against them. In the same way, there is also fear of work. Never fear work. Learn the way to do it and face it. Fear will fall away by itself.”

Hearing Raghuvansh Kaka’s thought, just as relief came into my mind, a long breath also left me. Then Raghuvansh Kaka said further, “Sinheshwar, people also feel fear after doing wrong, so keep away from wrongdoing. The moment you learn the right way to do a task, fear will disappear. Fear means ignorance, darkness. So the more alert you make yourself, the more fearless you will become. Keep living your life with a calm mind. Needless fear will stay away from your mind.” ❑

Lost

☰

It was Friday. The sun was still glimmering in the sky, but it had not yet set. I was on my way to Bishtaul market. I go to Bishtaul market once a year. You may understand it roughly like this: after Durga Puja is over, after the month of Aasin has passed, and in the first week of Kartik, I go to Bishtaul market every year to buy sickles and hand hoes. Markets are held in the villages on all four sides of our own village, Raghunathpur. Every market has its own character and speciality.

My home is in the southern tola of the village, so while going to the market I have to cross most of the tolas of the village. Just to the north of our village lies Bishtaul, where the market is held. Since it is a village market, it lasts only two or two and a half hours. It begins an hour before sunset and continues for another hour or hour and a half after sunset.

The shape and appearance of Bishtaul market are still the same as they were twenty years ago. Of

course, many changes have come in other markets, bazaars, village squares and crossings, but Bishtaul market remains as it was before. It is a village market. Traders from the surrounding villages come there, and buyers come too. Even today, the same potters who make earthen pots and utensils, the same blacksmiths who make sickles, hand hoes, small axes, knives and betel-nut cutters, and the same sellers of vegetables, tea and betel remain at Bishtaul market as they have done from earlier days. Yes, this much has certainly changed: the traders who were there twenty years ago have either died or, because of old age, no longer come. Now their sons come. The vegetables grown in the villages, the sickles and hand hoes made there, and the earthen pots made there are the goods for sale, and those are the things people buy. Because of this, their prices do not fluctuate as much as the prices of market goods, that is, goods brought from outside. Many irregularities have entered outside goods, and they continue to enter. Just as there is arbitrariness in the price of goods, there is arbitrariness in their weight too. There is no certainty either of weight or of quality. Well, whatever it is, the buyer must think for himself.

Since the market lasts for only a short time, two or two and a half hours, I was walking fast. As I was passing the northern tola of our village, Raghunathpur, my eyes fell on Sukhdev. Sukhdev's house stands just beside the road on the western side.

Seeing Sukhdev, my mind was disturbed. The reason was that Sukhdev, who was forty-five or fifty years old, had become so thin because of illness that he was hardly recognisable. Seeing him sitting at the doorway, I felt like asking why his body had come to such a state. But at once my own mind said that if I began to ask after him, my work at the market would be left undone. So it would be better first to do the work for which I was going to the market, and while returning I would ask about Sukhdev's condition. Thinking this, I moved ahead in the same hurry with which I had been going to the market.

Just as the middle month of any season becomes adorned in its full beauty, the colour and shape of the market too had become lively. I did not have to buy anything else, so I went straight to the seller of sickles and hand hoes. As soon as I went near, Dhanesar recognised me. Recognising me, he said, "I am seeing you after many days."

I said, "I come only when there is work. I come one day, buy sickles and hand hoes, and which last the whole year. Though the work of sickles and hand hoes is greater from Kartik to Jeth and Aakhadh. During the rest of the time, there is hardly much use for them."

I selected three sickles and three hand hoes and asked the price. The three sickles and the three hand hoes were of three kinds, so their prices too were of three kinds. For heavy work, I bought one heavy hand hoe; for medium work, one medium-sized hand hoe;

and for fine work, such as weeding garlic and onion, a small hand hoe. In the same way, for gardening, that is, for cutting the branches and leaves of trees and plants, I bought a thick and strong sickle; for medium work, a medium-sized sickle; and for fine work, such as cutting grass and leaves, a thin sickle. I paid the money and left.

By the time I came out of the market, the sun had set, but darkness had not yet fallen. The time was still like daylight. Our village and Bishtaul are joined together.

As soon as I crossed the southern boundary of Bishtaul and entered the northern boundary of our village, my mind suddenly went to Sukhdev. As soon as it reached Sukhdev, this arose in my mind: this is life. Whatever I may be, I must be fifteen or twenty years older than Sukhdev. Yet my own body and health still seem to be the same as they were twenty or twenty-five years ago. Sukhdev's father, Motilal, is my friend, a companion of my age. He is only one and a half years older than I Then how did Sukhdev become like this? Then again my own mind said that there is no certainty about life or the body. It has also been said that the body is a house of disease and illness.

Since the village is close, I soon reached Sukhdev's house. I had already decided in my mind that on my way back I would stop at Sukhdev's place and ask him why his body had come to such a state.

When I was returning home, the people at home would know that I had gone to the market. So if I was a little late, let it be so.

I was still coming along the road when Sukhdev's wife said to her husband, "It was market day. You should have brought some vegetables. There is nothing for the night."

I heard Sukhdev's wife, but I did not stop. I kept walking straight towards Sukhdev's doorway. Seeing me, Sukhdev's wife fell silent, and Sukhdev too said nothing. Leaving the main road, I took the path towards Sukhdev's doorway, and just as I reached there, Sukhdev's wife went towards the courtyard and Sukhdev said, "I touch your feet, Uncle."

Blessing Sukhdev, I said, "Stay well, Sukhdev."

Of course, the thought had already arisen in my mind that I should ask Sukhdev why his body had come to such a state. But I also felt that since I had come to ask after him, I would speak of it in the course of conversation. So, after blessing him, I sat on the cot at Sukhdev's doorway.

Seeing the bag of sickles and hand hoes, Sukhdev said, "Had you gone to the market, Uncle?"

I said, "Yes. The sickles and hand hoes I had bought last year are no longer fit for work. Kartik has come. From now on, these are the things that will be needed, so I went to the market to bring them."

Sukhdev shook his head and remained silent.

Ending my own thought, I spoke again, "Sukhdev, do you not pay attention to your body?"

Hearing my words, Sukhdev remained silent, but the colour of his face became even more faded with sorrow. After staying silent for a short while, Sukhdev said in a faint voice, "Uncle, my life has gone astray."

Hearing Sukhdev's words, many kinds of thoughts rose and stood in my mind. My life has gone astray–what did that mean? Of course, I understood this much: a small child may get lost in a fair or while going from one village to another, and after some time may even be found. Such cases of being lost are rare where someone is not found for a lifetime. Even then, they happen only now and then. Before going anywhere, people find out whether they have seen the place or not. If they have seen it, they go alone, and if they have not seen it, they go with someone else. In the end, I could not make sense of Sukhdev's thought. I said, "What has been lost, Sukhdev?"

Hearing my question, Sukhdev's heart seemed to stir deeply. His voice became choked. In that choked voice, Sukhdev said, "Uncle, what I understand now, I did not understand earlier. If I had understood it then, the condition my life has come to would not have happened."

Sukhdev spoke in veiled words, so I could not understand his thought properly. I only heard him. Because of that, the curiosity in my mind grew even

more. I said, "Sukhdev, I am not able to understand your thought properly. Speak a little more clearly."

Hearing my words, a lump seemed to rise in Sukhdev's throat. Both his eyes filled with tears. I too was looking at his face. Seeing his face, many thoughts began to rise in my mind. But without understanding the matter, I did not think it proper to say anything. So I kept looking at Sukhdev's face quietly.

Sukhdev said, "Uncle, as long as the burden of the house was on my father, I kept thinking that everything would go on like this forever."

Hearing Sukhdev's words, my mind said that this was Sukhdev's childishness. At once another thought arose in my mind: such childishness does not happen only to Sukhdev, it happens to most people. They do not understand that just as everything in the world is moving, human life and the human body too are moving. We all see that after a child is born, he grows according to time. From a child he becomes a young boy, then a grown person. From youth he becomes a man, and from manhood he moves towards old age. The same thing happens in the family too. As long as the father is there, the burden of the family rests on him. When he dies, or when after growing old he becomes unwell, the burden comes upon the son's shoulders. Of course, there are many other reasons too through which the father's burden, the burden of the family, comes upon the son. But that is not the

matter now.

I said, “Sukhdev, you are educated. Why did you not understand this?”

Just as before falling ill, a person walks on many wrong paths that lead to illness but says nothing to anyone, and when he becomes sick and moves towards death, he begins to say everything, Sukhdev too began to speak.

“Uncle, as long as Father was carrying the burden of the house, I used to spend the whole day either in idle talk or at cards. The thought never came into my mind that, as the saying in society goes, one day everyone must wear a shroud two and a half cubits long. If I had understood that, the path of life would have been different. But I never thought so.”

Hearing Sukhdev’s thought, I felt within myself that this does not happen only to Sukhdev. It happens to many people. The surroundings and behaviour of society too have become such that more and more people of the new generation are becoming victims of it. When I turned back and looked at the past and the earlier generations, that is, when I looked towards the social life of the past, my mind too accepted that such an atmosphere has not existed only today. It has existed at all times. In society, both streams, the good and the bad, have always been flowing. They flow even now and will flow in the future too. Everyone knows that this is Kaliyug. Before this was Dwapar,

before that Treta, and before that Satyug. In that same Satyug there was Harishchandra, who is called truthful king. But does that mean there were no thieves, cheats, rogues or wicked people in that age? That is not so. They too were there. In the same way, in Kaliyug, which is considered the worst age, it cannot be said that there are no good people, good thoughts or good deeds. They are there too. I said, "Sukhdev, pay attention to your body. Only if your body remains healthy will you be able to do anything."

As soon as he heard my words, streams of tears began to flow from both Sukhdev's eyes. Disturbed, he said, "Uncle, I can see no way ahead. My parents are old. Father is still healthy despite his age, but he has stopped doing heavy work. Mother, however, has taken to her bed. Our economic condition is not such that we can get Mother treated properly. My younger brother lives in Delhi with his own family. He neither gives a single rupee to the family, nor has he come to the village for ten years. On top of that, whatever land and fields there are, the ancestral property, he wants to sell his share and take the money to Delhi. It is good that Father is still alive, and because of that the land is still safe."

Hearing Sukhdev's pain, a line of Vidyapati came to my mind: "There is no end to my sorrow, O Bholanath, there is no end to my sorrow." I said, "Sukhdev, you yourself will have to bring your family to the shore, will you not?"

Sukhdev said, “Uncle, on one side there are my old parents, and on the other there are three daughters. All three are close in age, and all have become fit for marriage. You can see how heavy dowry, exchange and the expense of honouring the groom’s party have become in society.”

Darkness too was slowly becoming dense. Looking at the time, I said, “Sukhdev, I too suffer from night blindness, so now let me go. If it becomes too dark, I shall have difficulty walking.” ❑

He Proved Better Than I Did

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Twelve years later, after his mother's death, Mahendra came to the village to perform the shraddha rites. Of course, in society there are many different practices for performing shraddha. Just as the final post-death shraddha rite is performed on the thirteenth day, and is called teraha karma, the thirteenth-day rite, there is also the ardha-maasi karma, which is completed on the fifteenth day. Between these, there is a third practice too, which is completed on the eighteenth day. Apart from these, there is a fourth rite called maasi karma, which is completed on the thirtieth day.

Just as the rites differ according to the day, the shraddha rites themselves also differ. Broadly speaking, people in society accept three kinds of rites: vrishotsarga, panchdaan and kursi. Such rites have been performed for parents and others. Even among these three, there is no uniformity. In the vrishotsarga

rite, some people heat an iron branding rod in the fire, mark a calf with it publicly, declare it a bull, and then release it from bondage. Some leave aside the branding of the bull and perform other rites connected with the offering of the bull. In the same way, there is no uniformity in the panchdaan rite either.

Just as there is no uniformity in the shraddha rites, there is no uniformity in the feast either. After death, just as society has accepted different kinds of rites, it has also accepted the giving of food, that is, the feast. In feasts too, there is no uniformity. People say that if eleven persons are fed, the rite of offering food is complete. But what actually happens is different. It is different in the sense that some people feed members of their own caste from twenty-five or fifty villages. Here, by caste, I do not mean the human caste, but a particular caste within a caste-divided society. Some feed caste members from five or ten villages. In the same way, some people feed those of their own caste within the society of one village and consider themselves redeemed, while others consider the rite complete after feeding eleven persons within one society. Among them, there are also some who double eleven and feed twenty-two persons, and then consider the rite complete.

Just as there is no uniformity in the feast, there is no uniformity in the arrangement of food either, nor in the shraddha rites performed at the pond bank and

those performed within the courtyard and family. Some people give the greatest number of objects, offerings and gifts. Some give less, some even less than that, and some still less, yet they consider themselves freed and redeemed.

A village society is made up of many castes. Though there is one village and one society, there are many castes and many sects within it. In the same way, within one village, different Gods and Goddesses are accepted, and many kinds of sacred places, places of Gods and Goddesses, are also made. Though human beings are one caste, there are many sects, Gods, Goddesses, rules, customs, rites and manners, all different from one another. Even the flowers that bloom on flowering plants are divided. One God or Goddess is worshipped with one kind of flower, another with another kind. This is our society, in which all of us live.

What I have said so far concerns the rites after death. In the middle of all this, there is one more act. That is the burning of the corpse after death. There are many ways of burning a corpse too. In some families, the corpse is burnt with sandalwood. In some families, it is burnt with mango wood. In some families, it is burnt with some other wood, different from sandalwood and mango. And in some families, the mouth-fire is given with a torch of straw, and the body is then thrown into the stream as it is. Not only that, in some families, the corpse is buried in the earth

without being burnt.

Just as there are different processes for burning the corpse, there are also different practices for those who accompany the bier. In some cases, hundreds of people go. In others, the work is completed with only five or ten persons. What I have described until now is the process of the Hindu community. But society is made up of many communities. In some communities, after death, the corpse is burnt, but the other processes followed in the Hindu community are not performed. Another thing is that those who go from the family and society to burn the corpse consider themselves purified after bathing once the body has been burnt. They need neither cut their hair nor perform any other act to remove the impurity believed to touch those who burn a corpse. In other cases, after burning the corpse, people must go to the courtyard of the family whose dead body it was and touch iron and stone as part of the purification custom. Only after that do they receive the right to enter their own courtyard. There are also such people among those who go with the bier who, after returning from the cremation, go straight into their own courtyard. This is the post-death process in our society.

In a society where there are so many kinds of processes after death, bringing uniformity is not an easy task. Besides, society, that is, the people of society, are of many different natures. Therefore, it is

difficult to take one path in one direction on the basis of one thought. Another thing is that in society there are some people who give greater importance to life, to the living state, and consider the dead unimportant. But on the other side, there are also people who give less value to life and the living, and give greater importance to death. We see in society that a son or responsible family member does not even turn back to look at his parents when they are ill, when they are helpless because of old age or disease. He does not serve them in any way, in food, drink, medicine, care or attendance. But after death, the same person invites people from village after village and feeds them, and also earns praise for himself, with people saying that he performed the rites very well. This is the play between the living and the dead.

The post-death process, as I said above, may take place within thirteen days, or fifteen days, or after a month. After the shraddha rites, for the whole year, that is, for all twelve months, food is offered symbolically in the name of the deceased on the date on which the person died. Apart from this, every year too, as an annual rite, rituals and feasts are performed. In addition, every year in the month of Aasin, during Matri Navami and Pitri Paksha, people also go to Gaya and offer pinddaan.

In Mohanpur village, a man named Murari has two sons. The elder is Mahendra and the younger is Dinesh. Murari's family is a middle-ranking farming

family. Of course, in Mohanpur village, Murari's family is considered well to do.

Even now, the villages of Mithila are such that two to four per cent of families have ten, twenty, twenty-five or fifty bighas of land. The remaining ninety-five or ninety-six per cent are families who either do not even have homestead land for building a house, or have from five or ten kathas up to five or ten bighas of land. Here, this should not be understood in the way that, in the country, in India, ten per cent of families hold seventy-five per cent of the country's total wealth, and the remaining ninety per cent hold only twenty-five per cent among themselves. Well, that is a matter of the country. Here, the discussion is of Murari's family in Mohanpur village.

Murari has five bighas of cultivable land, ten kathas of orchard and groves, and a pond spread over fifteen kathas. His elder son, Mahendra, was intelligent at studies from childhood. Just as Mahendra had a strong desire to study, his father Murari also fixed in his mind that even if some land had to be sold, he would sell it, but he would educate Mahendra as far as Mahendra wished to study. Mahendra became a doctor.

In our region, such an atmosphere has formed, and is still forming, that both educated and uneducated people no longer wish to live in the village. Dr Mahendra too went to America.

When the younger son, Dinesh, passed matriculation, Murari said to him, “My boy, we have our fields and land. Along with that, in the village society where we live, the family and the lineage too have to be kept alive. You have studied enough for your needs, that is, you have read Hindi, English and Maithili books, and you can write as well. So what need is there for further study?”

After passing matriculation, Dinesh gave up his studies, took farming as the basis of his livelihood, and remained in the village.

Time keeps moving at its own pace. After going to America, Mahendra stopped coming to the village. There were reasons too. First, it was a distant country. Second, he did not get enough leave. Third, there was also difficulty in coming and going.

Just as Mahendra forgot the village, the family and society too forgot Mahendra. During those twenty years away from home, Mahendra’s father, Murari, died. Mahendra was informed of his father’s death, but he could not come to the village.

Mahendra too had two sons and two daughters. Of course, Mahendra and his wife did not get American citizenship, but all four children did receive it. According to the law in America, anyone born there gets citizenship of that country. Under this rule, all four of Mahendra’s children had received American citizenship.

In the beginning, when Mahendra completed his medical studies, like most people he too held the idea that if heaven was to be accepted anywhere on earth, it was America. Because of this thought, Mahendra went to America happily.

Of course, Indian thinker Rabindranath Tagore, and European thinkers such as Bernard Shaw, Romain Rolland and Einstein, had considered the Soviet Union to be heaven on earth.

While living in America, Mahendra's thinking began to change. The reason for that change was the life of his forefathers, the struggle of his own society, and the bond with the soil and water of the motherland.

Mahendra had bought his own flat in America, but with life, thoughts too keep changing. This began to happen to Mahendra as well.

On hearing the news of his mother's death, Mahendra decided to come to the village. Four days after the death, Mahendra came to Mohanpur village with his children. Just as he and his wife had changed in appearance, the appearance of all four children too was such that they looked different from other families of Mohanpur and from the children of his brother Dinesh.

As soon as he reached the village, old values began to grow strong in Mahendra's mind. What grew strong was the thought that in our society, that is, in

Mithila, there has been a tradition that whether it is the marriage of children, the shraddha rites of parents, or any public work or festival, a meeting of society is held. By holding such a meeting, the outline and the way of carrying out the work have also been decided. This very thought rose strongly in Mahendra's mind. To decide how his mother's shraddha should be performed, Mahendra called a meeting of society. Here, there is one more thing. In public work, such as a school, a hospital or any other public matter, people of all castes in the village sit together and decide. But in matters of shraddha or marriage, the discussion takes place within the particular caste society. Mahendra called a meeting of his own caste society. People give great importance to a social meeting and consider it supreme.

In the meeting, Mahendra placed the question of his mother's shraddha rites. In society, there are always people of all kinds. One or two people began to speak and give their views.

The mother belonged to both brothers, that is, to Mahendra and Dinesh. So both brothers should share the expenses equally. Some people gave the view that since Mahendra earned more, he should bear two-thirds of the expense and Dinesh one-third.

Sohan Kaka, who was an impartial man in society and also elderly, asked Mahendra, "Mahendra, your mother was ill for three years. During that time, who served her, you or Dinesh?"

Hearing Sohan Kaka's words, Mahendra was left without an answer. He said, "That service was done by Dinesh."

Sohan Kaka said, "Between the two brothers, who was better in serving the parents?"

Like a thief caught red-handed, Mahendra said, "Dinesh served them more than I did. He proved better than I did."

Giving the final decision, Sohan Kaka said, "You will have to bear the full expense of the shraddha rites." ❑

My Hopes Went Up in Smoke

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After Radhamohan had crossed the age of fifty, an awareness awoke in him that had been missing from his life. As soon as that awareness arose, Radhamohan began to turn back and look at his past. Then his own mind told him that his very life had gone astray.

When any object is lost, there is some sorrow, whether small or great. But after some time, people either forget it or try to forget it. They think that, because of one lost object, they are making their precious time and precious life heavy for no reason. What has gone has gone, and what can still be gained through effort is also being ruined. So it is better to forget it. Has this happened only to me? It happens to many people, and it will continue to happen in the future too.

The loss of an object is not so important, because an object is made by human beings and can be made again. After gaining this comfort, people forget that

object and become active again in the next part of life. But life is life. Life is not an object. It is the maker of objects. If life itself goes astray, what remains with which one can make up for it?

The more Radhamohan turned back and looked, the heavier his mind became with worry. To lose fifty years of life is not an ordinary matter. Is there any certainty about life, about how long one will live? Yes, if one lives for a hundred years, then half of life has been lost. If one lives for one hundred and fifty years, then one third has been lost. If one lives for two hundred years, then one fourth has been lost. But life is not like that. Our ancient sages have said that human life is of a hundred years. By that measure, half of it had gone. But is there any trustworthy basis even for this, that one will certainly live for a hundred years? In the pages of history, there are lives of people who lived for a hundred years and even a little more. On that basis, our forefathers considered human life to be of a hundred years. But is it false that a child dies even in the womb, and that a dead child is born? In the same way, death takes place at the age of one year, two years, four years, and also at ten, twenty, twenty-five and fifty. On top of that, such an age has come that day and night people travel by vehicles, and they die in accidents too. In such an uncertain life, if fifty years have sunk away, what remains by which life may still be understood as life, except on the strength of hope?

The more Radhamohan looked towards his life, the more the darkness of despair began to cover his mind. Just as the light of knowledge shines in deep darkness and awareness too begins to come through it, in the same way, awareness began to enter Radhamohan's mind. As soon as awareness came into his mind, the past days began to move away, and a glow of light began to appear.

Suddenly, it came into Radhamohan's mind: how did Prahlad receive that conscious power while still in the womb, through which his life became bright? It may be that Dhruva received it in childhood after coming to earth, Ambarish in youth, Dhritarashtra in old age, and Ajamila at the time of death, and their lives became bright. But only fifty years of his own life had sunk and been ruined. The rest was still left. Even in that, much could be done. The elders say, whenever one wakes, that is the morning. So why should he not take himself into that light and make his life bright? A new awareness entered Radhamohan's thought.

The worry that had been in Radhamohan's mind until then slowly began to clear. As it cleared, new enthusiasm rose in his mind, and his heart felt light. At that very time, an old friend of Radhamohan, Manesar, arrived.

Radhamohan and Manesar had both been enrolled together in class eight of the high school. When both of them reached class nine, Manesar continued at school, but Radhamohan's studies

slipped away from him. It was not that Radhamohan knowingly left school, his studies slipped from his hands. The reason was that from childhood his inclination had grown towards kirtan and bhajan. In village after village there were kirtan and bhajan groups. Not only in different villages, even within one village there were many such groups among different castes. They sang bhajan and kirtan either at doorways or at shrines every day, from evening until the time for eating and drinking at night. Radhamohan too fell into that satsang.

At that time, the atmosphere in society was such that in village after village there were Ramleela, Krishnaleela and Raasleela groups, along with drama, nautanki, Uttamchand, and dance groups of farmers and labourers. Of course, any group, whether it was of Ramleela, Krishnaleela or Raasleela, or of nautanki, drama, Uttamchand, or the dance of workers and farmers, also ran socially, that is, it crossed the boundary of one caste and worked in a collective form. Later, when cinema arrived, all these began to decline.

Many sects, such as the Kabir Panth and Nanak Panth among the nirgun traditions, and the Ramaut and Krishna Margi among the sagun traditions, were also active. Even in one family of one caste, there were many kinds of sectarian influence. In a family of five, one person followed the Kabir faith, while another became a devotee of Rama and followed the Ramaut

path.

In all sects there were some differences and also some similarities. Apart from dance and performance, at shrines and in families too, ashtayam, navah, kirtan and many kinds of yajna and chanting, such as Chandi Yajna and Sahasra Chandi Yajna, were held, and in some places they still continue. Kirtan too went on in many forms, and in some places it continues even now.

Apart from kirtan and bhajan, there were feasts and bhandaras too, and they still take place. A bhandara is a collective meal of the Vaishnav sect, while a feast is a collective meal on occasions such as shraddha, marriage, mundan and so on.

When Radhamohan was studying in class nine, he became influenced by kirtan and bhajan, and because of that his studies stopped. With his mind turning towards kirtan and bhajan, Radhamohan's interest also moved towards musical instruments. His family was not very well settled, but it was certainly middle-ranking. Besides, being the only brother among four sisters, he received much love and affection from his parents. As his interest moved towards instruments, towards the harmonium, dholak and cymbals, Radhamohan stole the hundred rupees kept by his father at home and, with a friend, went to Samastipur and bought one dholak, one harmonium and two pairs of cymbals.

When his father, Govind, needed money and

went to take out the money kept at home, he was stunned to find it missing. He asked Radhamohan, “My boy, did you take the money?”

Radhamohan had already bought and brought the dholak, harmonium and cymbals from Samastipur. He said, “Yes. I bought and brought a dholak, cymbals and a harmonium for kirtan.”

There is an old saying in society: where was the ghee lost? In the arhar dal itself. Seeing the instruments and articles for kirtan and bhajan, Govind said nothing.

After passing matriculation, Manesar enrolled in college. Manesar was not very good at studies, but he was not very dull either. Just as he had passed matriculation in the second division, he passed BA in the second division too. After BA, he became a teacher in a high school.

As soon as Manesar came to Radhamohan’s place, he asked, “Radha Bhai, how are you?”

Because of the life he had lived until then, Radhamohan had become disappointed. After the kirtan group, much of his time had also been spent in the nautanki party. He worked in the nautanki party for almost ten years. Later, that party broke up. And it was not only that one party that broke up. Many parties broke up.

After the nautanki party broke up, Radhamohan began to work in a drama party. After some time, the

manager of that drama party died. Then that party too broke up, and all the artists and instrument players scattered. By then, Radhamohan's age had crossed fifty. In the meantime, his parents too had passed away. Of course, from his father, or say from the family, Radhamohan did have four bighas of land. But though the land was there, during his father's time Radhamohan had never gone even to the boundary of the fields, nor did he have any skill in farming.

Until now, people in society had known and recognised Radhamohan as a good artist, but that too now began to change. After the drama party broke up, Radhamohan no longer remained an artist. He was left only as an ordinary person. Seeing his ruined life, Radhamohan said to Manesar, "Manesar Bhai, my life has sunk."

Of course, Manesar too knew about Radhamohan, but knowing about someone and making him say it from his own mouth are two different things. Even now, many people hold the belief that people of earlier times did not speak a lie, and people of today do speak a lie. But that is not the real matter. The human and social life of earlier generations was not many-sided like life today. Since society and life were undeveloped then, the lives of most people were simple and level. Because of that, they did not feel as much need to speak a lie as people feel in today's surroundings.

Manesar said, "How has life sunk?"

Radhamohan did not wish to open his mouth and speak because of the shame of his wasted life. But when an illness, some incurable illness of the body, takes a fierce form, the patient begins to speak publicly even about the most hidden illness that he had pressed down within his mind. In the same way, Radhamohan said, "Manesar Bhai, the day I left my studies, there was hope and faith in my mind that I would become a good singer, a good artist. But today I see that all the flight of my heart has gone up in smoke. Where it has gone, there is no trace."

Manesar asked, "What are you thinking now?"

Disturbed, Radhamohan said, "The marriage of my three daughters is necessary. You can see what the time has become. A daughter's marriage has become frightening, like a demonic custom. So I shall have to cut into the share of both my sons, sell the fields, and arrange the marriages of all three daughters. What will come of my thinking?"

Manesar said, "Is that so?"

Radhamohan said, "What other way is there?" ❑

Blessing Money

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It was the last week of Phagun. Seven days had passed since Shivaratri, but there were still eight days left for Phagua. A change was coming into the weather. It was neither as hot as Baisakh and Jeth, nor as cold as Poos and Magh. Yes, this much had certainly happened: in the evening there was warmth, not sharp heat but gentle warmth, and in the early morning there was not the bone-shaking cold of Poos and Magh, but a moderate chill. Spring had clearly entered the season.

Compared with other years, the cold too was less this time, and the heat had not arrived in late Phagun as it usually did in other years. In years when the cold wave lasted many days, the cold stayed stronger at this time too, and in years of drought, the heat too was stronger. That had not happened this year. Compared with other years, the turn of the season was balanced.

Even so, though the early morning cold and the evening cold or heat were not sharp, it was still such

that in the morning one had to wrap oneself in a woollen shawl, while in the evening one could manage without a shawl. By mealtime at night, many people had even stopped using shawls. Well, whatever it was, it was the nature and play of time and weather.

At five in the morning, Krishna Kumar rose from his bed, tied the woollen muffler lying beside his pillow around his ears, wrapped a woollen shawl around himself, opened the door of the room and was about to step out when he heard a voice from the road, "Chillies, coriander, turmeric, garlic! Will you buy some?"

Hearing the voice from the road, Krishna Kumar looked at the clock hanging on the wall of the room. It was five o'clock. No one in the family had got up yet. His own sleep had broken, so he had risen. Meanwhile, his wife, Rukmini, also got up and said to Krishna Kumar, "Call the chilli seller."

Hearing his wife, Krishna Kumar came out of the room without saying anything, turned towards the road and said, "Chilli seller, stop here."

As soon as Krishna Kumar called out, the chilli seller stopped on the road, got down from his bicycle and pushed it towards the doorway. By then, Krishna Kumar and Rukmini had also come out of the house and reached the doorway. Seeing Krishna Kumar, Badbadiya said, "What will you take, my boy?"

Krishna Kumar remained silent. Rukmini said,

"We shall take chillies."

"How much?"

"A quarter of a kilo."

Just as a skilled craftsman, or a skilled reader and writer, keeps all the things he uses arranged in their proper places, Badbadiya too had arranged everything, from the goods for sale to the weighing scales and weights. As soon as Rukmini spoke, Badbadiya weighed the chillies and gave them to her.

Krishna Kumar asked, "How much is it?"

"Twenty-five rupees."

Since it was early morning, Krishna Kumar said nothing further. The thought had arisen in his mind that he was the first customer of the morning. If he bargained over the price, the poor man would have to go on bargaining with buyers throughout the day. Of course, there was no real basis for such a thought, but people do carry such beliefs in their minds. Krishna Kumar spoke according to that belief. Meanwhile, Rukmini kept the chillies in the courtyard, came back to the doorway and said, "The coriander and turmeric also seem to be almost finished, so take coriander and turmeric too."

Just as Rukmini said this to her husband, Krishna Kumar said to Badbadiya, "Give us coriander and turmeric too."

Unlike other traders, Badbadiya did not become annoyed and say, "Why did you not say everything at

once? Why are you saying it again and again?" Instead, joy rose in his mind that his first sale of the morning was growing larger.

Badbadiya was over fifty. It was the month of Phagun, and he had also come from a nearby village on a bicycle. So Krishna Kumar felt that he was approaching old age. He felt so because more than half the hair on Badbadiya's head, as well as his moustache and beard, had turned from black to white. Krishna Kumar had also begun to feel like talking to Badbadiya. This wish had arisen in his mind because, whether it was winter or summer, he saw every day that Badbadiya started his trade at five in the morning. What was the reason that at this age too Badbadiya was so active? In his own family he saw everyone still asleep, and it was the same in other families too.

Krishna Kumar said to Badbadiya, "It is still cold in the morning, and you have come from another village on a bicycle. You must have felt cold. Have some tea."

As soon as Krishna Kumar asked him to have tea, Badbadiya replied, "My boy, whatever the month may be, my wife and I get up at four in the morning. After doing our daily duties, I arrange all the goods and place them on the bicycle. Meanwhile, my wife prepares breakfast and tea. After arranging the goods, I eat breakfast and drink tea. Then I leave home and set about my life's work."

Hearing the words "set about my life's work", Krishna Kumar's mind was drawn towards Badbadiya's thought just as another snake is drawn when its eyes meet the eyes of a python. A python's eyes have the power to attract, to pull the other towards itself. The other cannot escape and slowly comes near the python's mouth. As soon as it comes near, the python swallows it.

Krishna Kumar said, "How long have you been in this trade of selling chillies, coriander, turmeric and garlic, and how much do you earn in a whole day?"

Just as a person finds pleasure in telling the story of his life to someone else, joy rose in Badbadiya's mind too. Filled with that joy, Badbadiya said, "My boy, since you have asked about life, I shall tell you everything about my life."

Hearing from Badbadiya's mouth, "I shall tell you everything about my life," Krishna Kumar said, "Leave the bicycle here and sit on the cot at the doorway. Then both of us can talk, and meanwhile my wife will make tea. Drink tea and then go."

Rukmini too had begun to wish to hear the history of Badbadiya's life from his own mouth.

Just as Krishna Kumar's interest grew on hearing that Badbadiya would tell the story of his life, Rukmini's interest also grew. So Rukmini stopped making tea and stood at the doorway. Krishna Kumar said, "Since you wish to tell your history, begin from the very beginning, so that there is no difficulty in

understanding it."

Badbadiya said, "My boy, I must be close to fifty-five years old. Of course, I do not know my date of birth properly, but I am telling you by guess."

As soon as Badbadiya said this, Krishna Kumar accepted it and said, "Let us accept that you are fifty-five. Now go on."

Badbadiya said, "When I was five or six years old, my father enrolled me in school. Now there is a high school in the village, with about thirty teachers, but at that time there was only an upper primary school. It taught up to class five. At that time, there were only three teachers. After passing from the village school, I enrolled in Sonvarsa High School. When I was studying in class nine, I left my studies."

Hearing "I left my studies", Krishna Kumar asked with curiosity, "Why did you leave your studies?"

Smiling, Badbadiya said, "My boy, in my own village and in other villages too, I saw educated and uneducated young men wandering without work. More than fifty young men in our village were unemployed. It came to my mind that young men in all villages must be unemployed in the same way. Better than that would be to start some work of my own. The condition at home was not such that I could take capital from the house and start any business. Two years passed in this thinking and reflection. After two years, I also began to feel regret that I had left my

studies for no reason. If an educated person ploughs a field, his furrow will certainly be straighter than that of an uneducated person."

Hearing Badbadiya's words, both husband and wife, Krishna Kumar and Rukmini, felt like laughing. Holding back his laughter, Krishna Kumar said, "Then what happened?"

Badbadiya said, "By then, I too had not become a full young man, but I had become fit for marriage. In the village I used to see others, even those younger than me, getting married. Today, marriage does not happen in childhood, but at that time it did."

Krishna Kumar said, "Why was your marriage delayed?"

Badbadiya said, "Delayed? Not at all! My marriage too took place when I was about fifteen or sixteen. Today, people give vehicles in dowry, but at that time if someone gave a bicycle and a wristwatch, people thought he had given a great deal. I too was given a bicycle."

Rukmini said, "Then what happened?"

"When I had gone to my in-laws' house for the marriage, my mother-in-law quietly, hiding it from others, gave me one thousand rupees. The money I received as blessings after touching elders' feet came to five hundred rupees altogether. I made that money and the bicycle my capital and began my trade."

Krishna Kumar suddenly said- "Wonderful!"

Hearing "Wonderful", Badbadiya smiled and said, "My boy, I have been doing my own business for thirty-five years now. The bicycle I have now is the fifth one. In the meantime, after the death of my parents, I also held the shraddha feast. I married off three daughters, and I educated both sons up to BA. One works in the Kosi Project and the other in the Health Department."

The sun had risen. Seeing the rising sun, Badbadiya hurriedly said, "My boy, I shall tell you more another day. It has become late. I am going now." ❑

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